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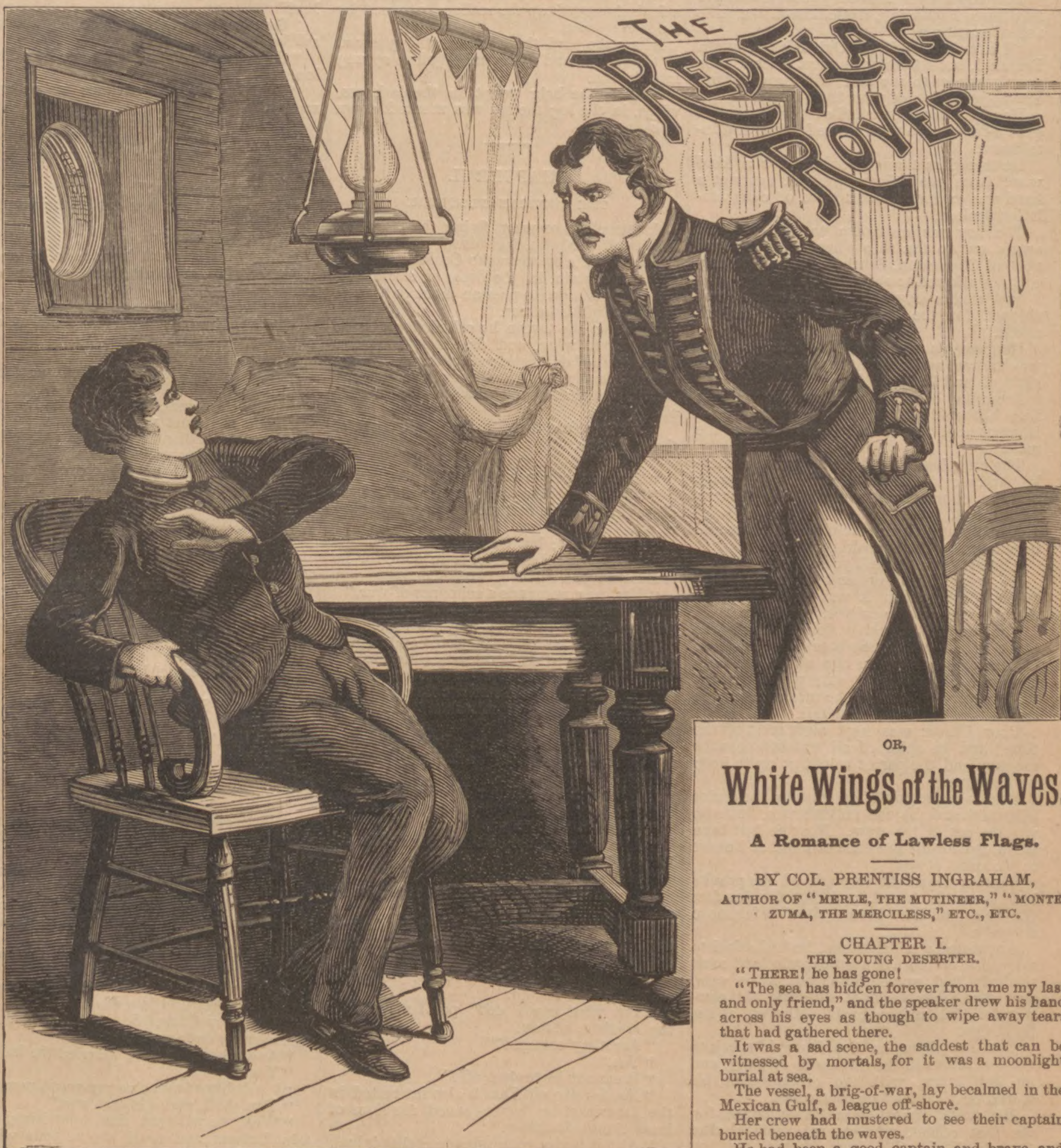
No. 610.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., July 2, 1890.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLVII.



OR,

White Wings of the Waves.

A Romance of Lawless Flags.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTE-
ZUMA, THE MERCILESS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG DESERTER.

"THERE! he has gone!

"The sea has hidden forever from me my last and only friend," and the speaker drew his hand across his eyes as though to wipe away tears that had gathered there.

It was a sad scene, the saddest that can be witnessed by mortals, for it was a moonlight burial at sea.

The vessel, a brig-of-war, lay becalmed in the Mexican Gulf, a league off-shore.

Her crew had mustered to see their captain buried beneath the waves.

He had been a good captain and brave, and had died after weeks of suffering from the effects of a wound received in battle.

"WHICH SHALL IT BE, BOY—YOU TO PILOT THE SEA SOLDIER TO THE LAIR OF THE RED FLAG ROVER OR HANG FROM THE YARD-ARM?" SAID CAPTAIN DARE, MENACINGLY.

His foe had been an English vessel nearly twice the size of the brig. The British tars had gained a footing upon the deck, and their leader would have cut down the wounded captain of the American craft, when a mere boy had shot him through the heart.

The fall of their leader temporarily stunned the English boarders, but they quickly rallied for a rush, which would have swept all before them, when the same youth, calling several sailors to his aid, swung around the pivot gun on the quarter-deck and fired it in the faces of the Britons.

The English were swept down like wheat before a scythe, and the Americans regaining their nerve beat them from the deck, the vessels swung apart and the brig was saved.

The wounded captain was borne to his cabin, and, sending for the young sailor, he said:

"Boy, you saved the brig, and you saved me from instant death, for I could not defend myself.

"You are a foremast boy, and have been one of the worst imps aboard this vessel; but, you have it in you to make a man whom your country will be proud of, and I, this day, appoint you acting midshipman, until you arrive in port, when my appointment will be ratified."

The boy's eyes flashed proudly, and his face flushed with joy, while he said in a voice full of gratitude:

"I have been full of Old Nick, Captain Brainard, but I thank you most sincerely for your goodness to me and will prove by my acts appreciation of your trust in me."

He was a handsome lad of fourteen, well grown for his age with a face fearless and intelligent.

He turned as though looking for a kind word from the officers present, but not a hand was extended, not a word of congratulation spoken.

The boy was unknown to all. He had swum out to the ship when she lay in the port of Charleston, South Carolina, and asked to be allowed to ship as a cabin-boy.

Just such a boy was wanted and he was shipped for the berth, and no questions asked.

He gave his name as Clover, and as such was known, and before the vessel was out of sight of land he began his pranks.

From the captain down no one was free from his mischief. He laughed at all punishment and was finally sent before the mast.

The crew had a pet bear, a parrot, a monkey and a cat. These Clover adopted as his especial chums and from that day the men had no rest.

A pompous officer pacing the deck would be startled by the squeaking words:

"Smart! smart! ain't you smart?"

He would flush up and order the parrot taken below, when it was discovered that the bird was not the culprit, but Clover.

The monkey would be found often in the bunk of an officer, the bear had possession of the captain's cabin one night, and only Clover could get him out; while the cat went skurrying among the men at mess one day with a bottle tied to its tail.

Poor Clover was kept aloft most of the time, and in spite of all watchfulness the monkey and the parrot would go up to keep him company.

Such was the youth, dreaded by the senior officers, hated by the midshipmen, but who was the pet of the crew. Now he had been promoted for his presence of mind and nerve in a combat at sea.

Captain Brainard through all his pranks had been his friend, and but for this fact Clover would have been dealt with far more severely.

Appointed a midshipman, he had asked to take care of the wounded captain, and most tenderly had nursed him; but, all in vain, for, after a few weeks of suffering, the commander died, and his burial followed, as has been seen.

Not an officer on board would speak to Clover, unless in the discharge of duty, and he well knew, with the captain gone, his would be a hard lot on that vessel.

His trials almost immediately began, for the first officer, who was in command after Captain Brainard's death, hated the boy most liberally, and the middies had nothing to fear from him, they knew.

So they began their petty spite with insults, whereupon Clover promptly knocked the first one down who gave the offense.

Another sprung to avenge the blow, and shared the same fate. Half a dozen then rushed in pell-mell to give the daring lad a thrashing which he would long remember; but a junior lieutenant stepped quickly to the rescue, with a feeling of fair play, and, mistaken for one of the middies in the *melee*, was struck a blow by Clover's hard fist which sent him reeling to the deck.

Instantly the commanding voice of the new captain was heard and silence reigned at once. The midshipmen told their story, which, of course, was all in their favor and against Clover, and their bleeding faces showed punishment at the hands of the young unfortunate.

The junior lieutenant was smarting under his blow, so forgot to explain, and Clover was instantly ordered lashed up to the grating to be struck thirty blows with the cat-o'-nine-tails, the commanding officer crying out sternly:

"I reduce you, Sir Mutineer, from the temporary rank given you, and sentence you to the lash and then to go into irons for the remainder of the cruise.

"Master-at-arms do your duty!"

Clover heard the command, and, quick as a flash, bounded up the ratlines, pursued by a dozen seamen.

Along the yard the lad ran, still pursued by the sailors, and with a mighty leap sprung into the sea.

And on the brig swept in the darkness, while, in the log the lad was marked down as a deserter.

CHAPTER II.

THE MEXICAN PLOTTERS.

A SCHOONER-OF-WAR, flying the Stars and Stripes at her peak, had dropped anchor in the harbor of a town on the Coast of Mexico, and her captain, in the dress of a civilian, had gone ashore to pass an hour or two as best pleased his humor.

Entering the tavern he called for a bottle of Mexican wine, and drank it leisurely, unmindful of dark glances cast upon him by two gentlemen, one an officer of the Mexican Army, seated at a table in a secluded corner of the room.

"You are sure that it is he?" asked one of the Mexicans.

"Yes."

"Can you not be mistaken?"

"Could I mistake one who has robbed me of my bride and fortune?" was the angry retort.

"I could not; but we can soon be certain by finding out if his vessel is in port, for he is a sailor, you said?"

"Yes, he commands a schooner-of-war."

The one he addressed called to a servant and gave some direction in a low tone.

The servant at once departed and in five minutes returned and said in a whisper:

"There is a schooner-of-war in the harbor, sir, and she flies the American flag."

"I knew I was not mistaken," the officer said.

"Well, Captain Urbana, what are you going to do in the matter?" asked the Mexican *caballero*.

"What can I do, Senor Escalon?"

"The lady in question is rich, you said?"

"Worth a million pesos."

"Ah! then it must be the Senorita Rachel Ravera?"

"It is she."

"I was sure that no other could be so rich."

"No, and you see what I lose by having to yield Don Ramon Ravera's daughter and only child to that dog of an American?"

"Yes, Senor Captain Urbana, you yield what I would not do."

"But what can I do?" petulantly asked the Mexican officer.

"Are they engaged?"

"Yes."

"It cannot be broken off?"

"No, for the old Don is also interested in the American, he having saved the lives of himself and daughter."

"Ah! it began with romance; that is bad, for love matches are hard to break off."

"Yes, a lagoon buccaneer swooped down

upon Don Ramon's hacienda on the coast one day and captured the fair Rachel, intending to hold her for ransom.

The Don pursued with a large force in a *goleta* and overhauled the pirate near the mouth of the lagoon where he had his haunt.

"It came on a dead calm, and the pirate felt that he would be taken and lose his prize, so threatened to kill the maiden if attacked, and unless his price of ransom was paid.

"Just then that American officer, whose vessel was in the lagoon at anchor, dashed out in his boats, captured the pirate, and—well, I've said enough to show that I was given the cold shoulder just as I deemed myself the lucky winner of the fair Rachel's hand, and yonder is my successful rival," and the Mexican officer nodded toward the table where the American sailor sat complacently sipping his wine, all unmindful of the fact that he was the object of angry glances and comment.

"Well, you lose a fortune if you allow him to marry her?"

"Yes, not to speak of the loveliest woman in Mexico with it."

"True; but will you submit to it?"

"What can I do, I asked you?"

"What will you do if you don't marry her?"

"Go to ruin, financially, socially and as a soldier."

"So bad as that?" asked Senor Luis Escalon.

"Yes, for you will advance me no more money."

"I cannot without security."

"Then you see my situation."

"It is bad, but I believe you can better it."

"Just tell me how?"

"If the American was out of the way?"

"Well?"

"Could you win?"

"Yes, for I am not known to be on the verge of ruin, as I am, and as you well know."

"Perhaps better than any one else, I know it, Captain Urbana; but let us see if we cannot get rid of this American."

"I am willing."

"You are considered the best swordsman in Mexico."

"I have no equal," was the proud reply.

"Then we must pick a quarrel with the American, a challenge and duel will follow, and of course you will kill him."

"Yes, but will not that cause the fair Rachel to hate me?"

"It might, and to guard against it, you must first cause her to despise her lover."

"How can that be done?"

"He will of course go from here to the monte bank to play."

"Yes, naturally, for these Americans are bold gamblers."

"Do you know him personally, or, that is, have you ever met him?"

"No."

"Then he does not know you by sight?"

"No."

"Does the Senorita Rachel know that you are aware of this engagement between herself and the American?"

"She does not."

"Then she will feel that you had no motive in this quarrel."

"I cannot see how she can."

"Well, you must get into a game with the American and myself, and we will find another partner."

"You can then accuse the American of cheating, and I will see that one of the servants of the Casino places marked cards in his chair, so as to betray him when he arises."

"Others must see this too, and when he denounces you in return, simply say that you will waive the fact that he is a card cheat and meet him in a duel."

"The very thing, Senor Escalon, and I will carry it out as you suggest."

"And when you have married the lady?"

"Yes."

"I will have to receive my recompense."

"You shall, and a liberal one."

"Well, we will put that in writing, Captain Urbana, and until she is your wife I will enable you, by advancing funds, to keep up your usual style; but I will de-

mand just one-fourth of her fortune in payment."

"Caramba! you will ruin me."

"No, I will keep you from ruin, gain you a fortune, of which I only ask one-fourth, and I am the one to take all chances."

"But now to keep my eyes on this American—ah! as I thought, he asks the way to the Monte Casino," and the two Mexican plotters followed the American sailor from the *salon* and saw him enter the fashionable gambling hall of the town.

CHAPTER III.

A FAIR CAPTIVE.

UPON the shores of an inlet of the Mexican Gulf, and in the sunny land of Mexico, stood a grand old hacienda, the home of one of the richest rancheros in the country.

It was a home of luxury and elegance within doors, and with all that was beautiful without, for its cultivated fields stretched away upon all sides, and beyond were the pasture lands dotted with droves of cattle and horses.

A walled-in flower-garden of several acres was upon the left of the hacienda, with a forest to the right, and a sloping lawn shaded here and there by majestic trees stretched away to the water of the little bay in front.

Beyond, through the pass into the inlet a glimpse of the blue Gulf was visible to the eyes of a maiden who was lying in a hammock swung upon the broad piazza which was built along the front wall of the hacienda.

A peon servant was seated near her, lazily waving a fan over the young girl, who had a book in her hand, yet was not reading.

That the maiden was one of Mexico's fairest daughters, a glance would show, and yet she seemed unconscious of her exquisite loveliness of face and form, though proud of the fact that she was the daughter of a noble line of Mexican and Castilian ancestry.

The peon girl suddenly started to her feet, with the cry in Spanish:

"*Santissima!* Senorita Rachel, there comes the senor!"

The maiden arose from the hammock quickly and gazed seaward, while the peon ran to a bracket near, and took from it a glass, which she brought to her young mistress.

Coming into the inlet she beheld a trim-looking *goleta*, under full sail.

"Yes, it must be father in his new yacht, and she is a beautiful craft."

"Get my sun-hat and shade, Irma, and we will go to the shore to meet him."

The peon girl hastily obeyed, bringing a jaunty hat and pink sun-shade, and the two walked down toward the shore, with the air of those who were upon terms of friendship, in spite of the fact that they stood in the relationship of mistress and maid.

Irma, the peon, was a very pretty girl, dark-faced, black-haired and with large, glorious eyes.

Her form was trim, and like her mistress she was clad in the picturesque Mexican costume.

By the time they reached the shore the *goleta* had crossed the inlet, quickly, under a fair wind and glided gracefully alongside the little wharf.

Then, as several men sprung ashore, Senorita Rachel Ravera came to a sudden halt, while Irma uttered a startled cry:

"It is not my father in his new yacht—let us return, Irma," said Senorita Ravera.

"Pardon, lady, but one word with you."

The speaker raised his sombrero, and stepped before the maiden, who started back, for she seemed to dread evil.

He was a young man, with a dark, handsome face, reckless and determined, and he spoke Spanish with a slight accent.

He was dressed gorgeously, fully armed, and looked just what he was, a bold lagoon buccaneer.

"Pardon me, senor, but I was expecting my father, and deeming your vessel his, I came to visit him. *Adios, senor.*"

Rachel Ravera spoke with calm dignity, and turned to depart.

But the young sailor answered quickly:

"No, senorita, I left your father in Havana, and have come here especially to see you."

"To see me, sir?"

"Yes, for I have had hard luck of late, my men are on the verge of mutiny and a

generous ransom from Don Ramon Ravera, paid for the return of his beautiful daughter, would just make my losses even."

"Ha! you are a pirate!" and Rachel turned deadly pale.

"Pirate is such a harsh word, senorita, I beg you to say a free rover."

"I will leave you, Sir Pirate, and I warn you away from Gulf View Hacienda, for we have a large force here."

"They are unable to protect you from Lamonte, the Rover of the Lagoons."

"Lamonte! the scourge of the coast! Holy Mother protect me! Are you that monster?"

"I am Lamonte, Senorita Ravera, and you are my prisoner," and the man sprang to the side of the maiden and grasped her firmly by the arm.

In an instant Irma, the peon, had dashed away like an arrow.

Lamonte the Rover called to her loudly:

"Hold! or I will kill you, girl!"

Irma heeded not, but ran on like the wind.

"Kill her, or she will alarm the force, who will follow in yonder lugger!" yelled Lamonte.

In response several shots were fired after the retreating girl, who still sped on, apparently unhurt.

"Will you come with me willingly, senorita, or shall I use force?"

"Do not touch me, and I will go with you, as I can do nothing else."

Rachel Ravera shuddered, but walked resolutely toward the *goleta*.

Another minute and she was a captive on board, while the pretty craft at once swung clear of the wharf and began to beat to sea, just as an alarm was sounded up at the hacienda, which the peon girl had already reached.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PIRATE'S THREAT.

IRMA, the peon girl, had quickly spread the alarm, and a score of armed *vaqueros* belonging to the place and a couple of dozen servants about the hacienda were soon running down toward the shore to board the lugger, which lay at anchor off the little wharf.

It was the freight craft of the ranch, to bring supplies from Vera Cruz, but the cabin was well fitted up, for the use of the Don and his daughter when going to the town, and there were a couple of guns on board for protection, with a number of small-arms.

She skipper of the craft was a peon, and his crew consisted of a dozen men of his own race.

These were now hastening on board, for when not voyaging the peon crew were engaged in duties ashore.

They were soon on the decks, the anchor and sails set, and running in to the wharf, they took on board the *vaqueros* and servants until they numbered twoscore well armed men.

The guns were cleared for action, and then aimed at the flying *goleta*, now nearly to the inlet pass, and beating out to sea.

The roar of the gun was heard on the deck of another *goleta*, which was sailing along the shore, a league distant.

It was a beautiful craft of sixty tons burden, with the rake and appearance of a Spanish yacht, such as were owned by wealthy Cuban planters.

Upon her deck was a swarthy-faced crew of a dozen men, and she had four guns, a brass twelve-pounder upon either broadside and amidships, and a pivot eighteen mounted fore and aft.

There was an awning aft, and under it sat a distinguished-looking man of fifty, whose appearance indicated Spanish and Mexican blood.

The sound of the lugger's gun in-shore caused him to start to his feet, and then he said, addressing a man who appeared to be an under officer:

"They have seen our approach, Juarez, and are saluting us with the lugger's guns."

"Yes, senor, but see there!" and the mate pointed to the sharp prow of the Lagoon Pirate, which just then shot into view beyond the heavily-wooded point of land which formed one arm of the pass into the hacienda harborage.

"*Santa Maria!* it is the Lagoon Rover!" shouted Don Ramon Ravera, for it was the master of the hacienda, returning from Havana with the beautiful yacht which he had had built there.

The *goleta* was now in full view on the starboard tack, and holding directly toward the Mexican yacht.

But quickly she discovered the stranger, and went about, and thus her course was shaped so as to clear the other point by a close shave on the port tack, and so reach the open waters of the Gulf.

The lagoon craft was a trifle larger than the Mexican yacht, and armed with a battery of six twelves and two pivot long-range guns, while her crew numbered half-a-hundred men.

Just as she gained the pass and went about, it brought her stern in position to open upon the pursuing lugger, and this she did; but though hit and evidently damaged to some extent, the lugger held on.

As she was armed she gave a broadside upon the yacht with her three twelves, and then had a chance, when headed up the coast, to open with her stern pivot-gun.

But then, though within range, she ceased firing at the yacht, and for some reason unexplainable opened upon the pursuing lugger only.

It then developed into a stern chase, with the yacht creeping up slowly on the Lagoon Pirate and the lugger barely holding her own.

The wind grew lighter each minute, and the pirate captain gazed anxiously at the pursuers and seemed to dread being overhauled.

Seated in a chair on deck was Rachel Ravera, anxiously regarding the situation, and watching every move of the pirates.

"The yacht is overhauling you, senor, so my captivity will be short-lived," she said quietly.

"Be not so sure of that, Senorita Ravera," was the smiling response.

"My father's crew and that of the lugger outnumber your force greatly."

"The battle is not always to the strong, senorita," and the confident manner of the buccaneer caused Rachel to feel even more anxious.

"Why did you stop firing upon my father's yacht, may I ask, Senor Pirate?" said Rachel Ravera after a pause of some minutes.

"For the reason that I do not care to kill the goose that lays the golden egg," was the enigmatical response.

"Ah! I think I understand by your remark that you do not wish to kill my father."

"Exactly so, for he being dead could not pay his daughter's ransom."

"And my father has seen me on board, so does not fire upon you, for I see that his yacht is armed."

"Yes, and a fleet sailer too."

"In fact, I think I shall have to demand with my ransom an exchange of vessels, for I did not know before that the Lady of the Lagoon, as I call my vessel, senorita, had a superior in speed."

"Well, senor, my idea is that the wind will die out and my father will rescue me from you," was the confident reply of the brave Mexican girl.

"No, he shall not take you from me, senorita, for I have the means to keep him off in calm or storm."

"May I ask what means you have that I do not see?"

"Yourself, senorita, for if they attempt to rescue you when I order them off, by Heaven they shall have only your dead body," was the threat of the Lagoon Pirate.

CHAPTER V.

A CRUEL ALTERNATIVE.

THE startling threat of Lamonte the Lagoon Rover, caused Rachel Ravera to turn very pale, yet she did not lose her nerve.

"Are you a Mexican, senor?" she asked coolly.

"No, senorita, I am an American, or rather was."

"You speak Spanish perfectly?"

"I learned it in a hard school, senorita."

"Well, Senor Pirate, as gold is your God, and you take human life and commit crimes

to get it, let us come to terms, for I can buy my freedom as well as my father."

"You might not value yourself so highly as your father does."

"Well, what price do you set upon me?"

"The Don is said to be about the richest man in Mexico, and you are his only child, so I think fifty thousand pesos are a fair sum to ask for you."

"It is a most exorbitant price, and I am not worth near so much."

"Your father will think you are."

"I'll give you half the sum for my release."

"Where is the money, senorita?"

"I will give you a draft on my father's bankers for the amount."

"They would not honor the draft."

"Lay to, signal the yacht and lugger to do the same and take my draft to my father for his indorsement."

"Yes, and be seized the moment I boarded his yacht."

"Go under a flag of truce."

"A white flag is no protection to me who sail under the black flag, Senorita Ravera."

"My father is an honorable man, and would respect the flag, sir, even if it shielded a pirate."

"Doubtless, but then I shall not give him the temptation to capture me."

"Then send a messenger."

"No, I shall take you to my retreat and then send him a messenger, bearing to him letters from you and me."

"You can explain the situation fully, and I can make my demand."

"Of fifty thousand pesos, sir?"

"Well, I named that sum, but your nerve under most trying circumstances, your beauty in fact, are winning me to regard you so highly that I shall test your father's love for you by naming a much larger amount—say a hundred thousand pesos."

"He cannot pay it."

"He is worth a million, or more."

"You seem well informed; but granted that he is, in lands, cattle and personal effects, it would cause him heavy loss, indeed, to sacrifice them for cash."

"Well, he must either pay my price, which I will now raise to one hundred and fifty thousand pesos, for I am becoming more and more infatuated with your loveliness, senorita, or he must abide by the alternative."

"And the alternative is what, senor?"

The Lagoon Rover gave some order to an officer whom he called to him, and then replied:

"With the sum I demand, senorita, I can return to my home and become an honored member of society, for no one need know that I won my riches through piracy."

"Your conscience will know, senor."

"I have done away with conscience in the long ago, lady."

"I am, as I told you, an American, and I became a pirate because one I loved and trusted gave me up, a poor lad then, for a rich man."

"I am revengeful, and would return and show her that I too had money, that I was as proud as Lucifer—in fact would I make her suffer and feel that she had wronged one who can never forget," and the face of the Rover grew clouded and angry.

"Where is your manhood to avenge yourself upon a woman?"

"She wronged me, she made me what I am," he answered, bitterly.

"You were weak, indeed, to wreck your life for a woman who was false to herself and her love."

"I believe you, senorita, are different, and that is why I love you."

"Sir!" and the eyes of the captive girl flashed fire.

"Pardon me, but it is true, and I tell you now that only a quarter of a million pesos will pay me for giving you back again to your father."

"I shall, as I said, take you to my stronghold—"

"Where is it?"

"Never mind where, senorita, but there you will go, and then I shall send my messenger to your father with my demand for the ransom I named."

"If he refuse?"

"I shall give him sixty days to redeem you, and then—"

"Then, Senor Pirate?" asked Rachel, as he paused.

"Then, senorita, if he does not redeem you, then you shall redeem me."

"I do not understand you, senor?"

"I shall change my evil career for one of honor, I shall devote my life to you, and in fact, you shall become my bride, Senorita Ravera."

"A pirate's bride! Heaven have mercy upon me!" fairly groaned the young girl.

And then she clasped her hands and raising them toward him in supplication cried:

"Ah, senor, you say that you are an American, then let me tell you that my mother was an American also, and for her sake spare me, the child of your country-woman."

"You shall have your ransom if you will give my father time to pay the fortune you demand of him; but do not threaten me with a fate so terrible as becoming your wife. I would sooner, far sooner, have you kill me, rather than such an alternative," and Rachel buried her face in her hands and burst into tears, while with a deep imprecation the pirate turned away, just as the flapping sails told him that a calm had fallen upon the sea.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OUTLAW'S DEMAND.

DON RAMON'S glass had revealed to him very quickly the cause of the pursuit of the pirate by the lugger, for he had discovered his daughter upon the deck of the *goleta*.

He had at once signaled the crew of the lugger to cease firing, knowing that in their anxiety to cripple and overhaul the pirate, that they overlooked the fact that their fire might kill his daughter.

For this reason, too, he did not open fire, yet could not understand why the Lagoon Rover did not open upon his vessel.

He was glad to see that his yacht was overhauling the lugger rapidly, and also creeping up with the outlaw craft, and he decided, as he passed the slower vessel, to take on board her crew, all excepting a working force.

As he drew near the lugger, he hailed and gave the necessary orders, and as the sharp prow of the yacht ran up to the quarter of the heavier craft, the men on board threw themselves upon the deck of the pretty *goleta*.

Then, when cast loose, she swept by the lugger and began to overhaul more rapidly the pirate vessel.

Irma, the peon, had gone on board the lugger, and also boarded the yacht, so that Don Ramon Ravera heard from her lips all about the kidnapping of his daughter.

The peon maid was wounded, too, slightly, in the arm, but paid no heed to it and said, when the Don set to work to dress it for her:

"Do not heed me, senor, for I am all right."

"But I ran away to alarm the *vaqueros* and crew of the lugger, hoping they could capture my loved lady."

"You are a brave girl, Irma, and but for you I would not have known that my child was the captive of a pirate."

"Ah! I fear the wind will leave us; but if it does I can go to the rescue in the boats," and Don Ramon glanced anxiously out over the waters.

At last the wind died utterly away, and then the Don was about to give the order to get the boats ready for an attack upon the pirate craft, which lay but three-quarters of a mile distant, when Juarez said:

"Pardon me, senor, but the lugger has sweeps and is heavily timbered so you could creep up to the pirate in her and board, where in the boats the men would be terribly exposed to the guns of the outlaw."

"You are right, Juarez, and I will try that plan, so signal the lugger to come up under the sweeps."

This was done and the yacht was anchored, so that every man on board could go to the attack in the heavily built lugger.

Then the lugger, under her four heavy sweeps began to creep slowly over the placid waters toward the pirate.

If the young Rover felt anxiety for the result he did not show it, and Rachel watched him closely.

He ordered his men to their guns and then

saying something in a low tone to his subaltern, which Rachel did not hear, took his place near her side and calmly gazed upon the approaching lugger.

With the light wind that had prevailed, the inflowing tide had borne the three vessels near the shore, and Lamonte was at last compelled to give an order to drop the anchor.

The *Goleta* was just off the mouth of a lagoon, heavily wooded and whose sluggish waters were being forced back by the tide.

The yacht was three quarters of a mile distant down the coast, and like the pirate not over a third of a mile from the shore, the hacienda harbor lying astern some ten miles distant.

The lugger, creeping upon her prey under the fall of her four heavy sweeps, each manned by two men, was almost within hailing distance of the pirate.

With his glass in hand Lamonte watched the coming foe with a smile upon his lips which gave Rachel real cause for alarm.

Her father had been a Mexican naval officer and in one of his cruises had touched at Charleston and there met her mother, then a reigning belle of that Southern city.

A year after he came back there to claim his bride, having resigned from the Mexican Navy in which he had won distinction; and at the grand hacienda on the coast Rachel was born and her mother died while she was yet a mere child.

Rachel knew that her father was brave to rashness, and with his child in the power of an outlaw, he would fight desperately for her rescue, so her heart was full of foreboding as she saw the lugger coming slowly toward the becalmed pirate vessel.

Suddenly, as the lugger came within hail, loud rung out the voice of Don Ramon, as it often had upon the quarter-deck of the cruiser he had commanded:

"Lagoon Pirate ahoy!"

"Ho the lugger!" responded Lamonte.

"You have a captive on your vessel?"

"I have."

"I am Don Ramon Ravera, and the lady in your power is my daughter."

"I know that well, Don Ramon Ravera, for that is why I made her my captive."

"Surrender her at once, for I do not wish to attack you with her upon your deck to shield your crew from my fire."

"Send me your draft on your Havana bankers for a quarter of a million pesos, and give me your pledge of honor not to follow in my wake for forty-eight hours after I sail from this anchorage, and I will restore your daughter to you," was the cool demand of the Rover of the Lagoons.

CHAPTER VII.

A CRUEL ORDEAL.

DON RAMON RAVERA was astounded at the cool demand of the Rover of the Lagoons.

Could he mean to require as a ransom a large fortune for the restoration of his daughter?

He had dreaded that Rachel should be in the power of one so vile, and hoped that it was for a ransom that had caused him to kidnap her.

Gladly would he have given ten, or twenty thousand pesos and felt that it was money well spent to get her so soon out of the clutches of the cruel Rover of the Lagoons.

But a quarter of a million pesos was nearly a quarter of his whole fortune.

In Mexico, Havana and New Orleans, where he banked his money, he had not in cash one-third that sum, and it would cause a delay of weeks to raise the sum and the sacrifice to be made to get it would cause him a loss of nearly as much more.

As he kept silent after the demand, lost in amazement, Lamonte hailed:

"Ahoy, the Sea Arrow!"

Here was a surprise to the Don, for the pirate knew the name of his yacht.

"Ho, the pirate," came the angry response.

"Did you understand my demand?"

"A quarter of a million pesos, you said?"

"Yes, Don Ravera."

"It would take a long time to raise such a sum."

"Your daughter is worth every peso of it to me."

"And every peso I own to me, Sir Pirate; but I cannot give you drafts which will be dishonored, and it will take perhaps two

months to place the money you demand in the banks."

"I cannot wait."

"Then I shall take my child from you at the point of the sword."

"Give way there at the sweeps!"

The heavy sweeps fell with a splash into the sea, but a moment after the voice of the Rover was heard with startling distinctness:

"Cease rowing at those sweeps!"

"Don Ramon, do you value the life of your daughter?"

The peons, at the sweeps involuntarily obeyed the order of the pirate, and the lugger once more ceased to move onward.

"How dare you ask such a question, Sir Pirate?" answered the Don.

"Will you pay the ransom I demand, and at once?"

"I cannot."

"You are worth millions."

"I cannot raise such a sum in weeks."

"Then your daughter is worth to me more than the sum I demand, and shall become my wife."

"Ho! incarnate fiend that you are, I shall tear your tongue from your throat for those words," cried Don Ramon, now maddened with rage, and without orders the sweeps fell again, and the lugger once more moved on.

"Hold! hold, I say!" cried the Rover, well knowing that the heavy bulwarks of the lugger would protect her crew, and that his men would be outnumbered and cut to pieces.

But the crew at the sweeps were urged on by Don Ramon, who was now determined to parley no longer, and the men on the lugger were as equally determined as their leader to rescue the beautiful girl from her danger, and show no mercy to the outlaws.

But suddenly a cry of horror from Juarez caused Don Ramon to cry out in piteous accents to the men at the sweeps to cease rowing, and all eyes were turned upon the pirate vessel.

There, visible to all eyes now, was Rachel Ravera standing upon the bulwark of the *goleta*, and by her side stood the Rover of the Lagoons, his hand upon her arm.

But that was not the worst of the painful scene, for about the neck of the beautiful girl was a noose and the rope, rove in a block at the end of the lateen yard, extended to the deck, where the other end was grasped by half a dozen Lagoon Pirates, ready to drag her into eternity at the command of their cruel commander.

"Now, Don Ramon, dare to attack me and I will give the order to my men to this minute end your daughter's life," cried the Rover of the Lagoons.

It was an appalling situation, a fearful moment to the poor father, who gazed in silence upon his child, her arms pinioned behind her back, the noose about her neck, as she stood there upon the bulwark, by the side of the pirate captain.

"Heaven have mercy! What can I do?"

He covered his face with his hands, and even the men dared not look upon the scene, fearing to see the pirate carry out his fearful threat.

"Don Ramon, your daughter's ransom at once, or she becomes my bride!" came in mocking tones.

But, they changed at once to a loud cry of alarm, for, suddenly, out of the lagoon dashed four boats filled with men.

At the stern of each from a small staff waved the flag of the United States! The oars fell with a rapid, regular motion that showed they were manned by the sailors of a vessel-of-war.

In the stern of the leading boat stood an officer, his sword pointed toward the pirate craft, as though urging the rowers more swiftly on.

"Back! for Heaven's sake, back, or they will murder her!" shrieked the Don in a voice that reached those in the boats.

But, they were not heeded, for the officer waved his sword and held on.

"Can he see the fearful doom that threatens her, senor?" asked Juarez in a tremulous voice, and the Don again called out to the commander of the boats to cease rowing.

But a wave of the sword again was his answer, and he seemed to urge his rowers more swiftly on.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLUE-JACKETS TO THE RESCUE.

DON RAMON was appalled at the danger to his child.

Could not the officer in the boat see that his daughter stood there on the bulwarks of the *goleta*, with a noose about her neck, her hands bound behind her and the other end of the rope held by relentless pirates?

Could he not see the cruel Lamonte standing by her side, his hand upon her arm to support her?

And yet, if the officer leading the attacking party did see the fearful danger to Rachel Ravera he did not heed it, but still came in.

Then the voice of the pirate chief was heard:

"Back with those boats! cease rowing, or I hang the girl!"

But, no response came from the officer; the boats still rushed on at a terrific speed, the oars bending under the mighty strokes of the oarsmen.

"Ho! those boats! Back, I say, or take the consequences!" shouted Lamonte.

And loud came the cry of entreaty from Don Ramon for the officer to heed the warning.

He would have given every *peso* he possessed and become a beggar rather than precipitate such a fate for the idol of his heart.

But the American officer heeded not the threat of the pirate nor the appeal of Don Ramon, but urged on his blue-jackets to the attack.

The boats almost sprung from the water at each tremendous stroke of the oarsmen; while, calm and determined, swaying with the movement of the cutter, the officer stood, his word pointing toward the pirate craft.

He was a young man, dressed in a well-fitting uniform. His face was stern, resolute, fearless—a face to win admiration from men and women alike, one to inspire confidence as a leader.

His physique was that of an athlete, and his movements quick and decided.

In the boat with him was a midshipman at the tiller, eight oarsmen, and a dozen men armed with cutlasses and pistols.

Each of the other boats was commanded by an officer, and were urged on by six and four oars respectively, having besides a force of from eight to ten men, so that the attacking party was some fifty strong.

Finding that he did not check the coming boats, Lamonte called out:

"Ho, those boats! I'll give the girl up if you will not attack me!"

Still the same silence from the leader of the American blue-jackets, and in despair the pirate sprung from the bulwarks and ordered his men to fire.

His captive was forgotten in the danger to himself, his crew and vessel. She stood upon the bulwarks, leaning against the ratlines, and viewing the situation with white face but intense interest.

The pirates opened a heavy fire upon the boats, when the tall form of the officer was seen to drop back into the stern-sheets.

But, instantly, he arose again, and now for the first time his voice was heard:

"Men, there lies your game—trap it!"

A cheer broke from the crews of the boats, and was answered by a fire from the pirates, with heavy guns and small-arms.

An oar here and there was broken, a man killed and the gunwale of one of the boats was shattered, but the oarsmen did not falter.

Then the pirates opened a terrific fire, and one of the boats was torn so badly that it sunk, leaving its crew struggling in the water for life, and a few crimsoning the sea with their blood.

"Ho, the third cutter!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" came the answer from the officer in command of the boat.

"Pick up those men and then come on to my support."

"Ay, ay, sir!" and the third cutter stopped to carry out the order, while the remaining boats pressed on toward the *goleta*.

The fire of the pirates now became hot and fierce, and yet the blue-jackets were not checked.

They still held on, and not a shot came from them, for they would not risk harming the beautiful girl still standing upon the bulwarks.

A moment more and the pirates had fired

the last shot which could be turned upon their foes before reaching the vessel, and loud rung the order of Lamonte!

"Repel boarders here!"

The pirates crowded about their leader just as the leading boat touched the *goleta*, and then came a volley directly in the faces of the boarders.

Some dropped back; others were wounded; but the leader of the blue-jackets gained the deck and his loud command was heard upon the lugger, which was pulling to the scene under her sweeps.

"Use your cutlasses, men!"

The cheer of the Americans answered the command, and as they gained a footing upon the deck the second boat came alongside and its crew boarded.

Back the pirates were forced, but only for a minute, and the battle became a desperate one.

But the third boat, with the crew of the fourth, boarded now, and the pirates were beaten back, cut down and shown no mercy, until a number sprung overboard into the sea to escape the deadly blows of the blue-jackets' cutlasses.

"Hold, blue-jackets! The fight has ended!" cried the leader. The pirate craft was won, Lamonte was a prisoner and taken below badly wounded, just as the lugger came alongside and darkness fell upon the sea.

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER THE COMBAT.

JUST as the lugger came alongside the pirate craft, the young and daring leader of the blue-jackets sunk to the deck, and his men gathered quickly about him.

Don Ramon's first act after springing on board was to rush to his daughter's aid.

She was leaning heavily against the ratlines, and could not have borne the strain much longer, while, with her arms pinioned behind her she could not aid herself.

The cruel rope was taken from about her fair neck, her hands were untied, and the young girl was helped to the deck, where, for a moment, she seemed as though about to swoon away.

But she rallied quickly, and cried:

"I saw it all, father, that desperate combat, and they saved me; but, *he* has fallen, and is wounded. Let us help him first!" and she moved toward the wounded officer.

The men fell back and the father and daughter beheld an officer kneeling by the side of the wounded leader of the blue-jackets.

"Oh, sir, has he been fatally hurt?" asked the melodious voice of Rachel Ravera.

The officer started, raised his cap and answered:

"I sincerely hope not, lady; but, he has three wounds, one from a bullet striking him in the left arm, another from a bayonet thrust in the shoulder and the third is from a sword-point, and I think the pirate chief gave it to him."

"I can hardly say how dangerous they all are; but he must be at once taken on board his vessel, which lies in the lagoon."

"Pardon, senor, but I am Don Ramon Ravera, and my yacht and my home are at the service of your captain and his crew."

"I thank you, sir, and it would be well to have Captain Dare where he can have the best of care, so I will gladly accept your kind offer."

"I am Surgeon Emory, senor, of the American schooner-of-war *Sea Soldier*, Captain Cecil Dare, commanding."

Don Ramon extended his hand cordially, presented his daughter to the young surgeon, and said at once:

"Now there is a light breeze coming up, and I will send a boat to have my yacht come here for your commander and the other wounded of your crew, for I can give shelter to all."

"You are most kind, Don Ramon, and I accept your hospitality, for our schooner is undergoing repairs in the lagoon, and no place for wounded men just now—but what does that mean?"

As Surgeon Emory spoke, shouts and cries were heard in the direction of the Mexican yacht, and flashes were seen through the gathering darkness, followed by a commanding voice ordering men to their posts, and to get under way.

"What does it mean?" cried Don Ramon. "It means, sir, that the pirates who sprung into the sea swam to your vessel and have taken her."

"Ho, men, into that cutter and we'll retake her," and Lieutenant Harry Orville, who was in command now, sprung into the cutter followed by a dozen men and pulled rapidly away toward the yacht.

But the Sea Arrow had gotten the breeze first, and it came with a good puff, so the fleet vessel was already moving seaward under full sail.

The pirate *goleta* and lugger were side by side, with sails up, and the coming breeze necessitated their parting company, so the next officer in command, a midshipman, gave the orders to cast loose, and Captain Dare was taken into Lamonte's cabin, where Don Ramon and Rachel also went along with the surgeon.

A search of the vessel revealed the fact that Lamonte had escaped, and if wounded at all it was not of a serious nature, for he had slipped through the stern ports into the sea and swum to the yacht.

Some dozen of the pirate crew had also done the same thing, and certain it was that the Sea Arrow had fallen into the hands of the outlaws.

The midshipman left in command by Lieutenant Orville soon saw that the cutter could not overhaul the yacht, so he stood in chase with the pirate vessel and opened fire with the pivot-gun.

Lacking speed he picked up the cutter, and Lieutenant Orville himself trained the gun upon the yacht, but with no marked effect, and, as a storm was threatening and the deck was strewn with dead and dying, he gave up the chase and decided to stand for the hacienda harbor as Don Ramon urged.

The lugger was signaled and orders given for her to run in to the lagoon with the schooner-of-war boats in tow, and report to the officer left on board the situation and that he was to follow to the hacienda's harbor the following day.

It was just before midnight when the captured *goleta* ran into the snug harbor under the skillful pilotage of Don Ramon and glided alongside the little dock to which the wounded captain and his men were hastily removed and from thence to the hacienda.

And not a moment too soon, for hardly had the *goleta* dropped both anchors off-shore when a terrific storm burst upon the sea and land, shaking the hacienda to its foundation, and driving huge billows into the little harbor.

And all unconscious of the storm and his triumph, Cecil Dare lay in the grandest guest's chamber of the hospitable Mexican home, while the skilled surgeon was doing all in his power to save the life of his gallant commander.

CHAPTER X.

PLEDGED.

THE storm which broke upon sea and shore soon after the arrival of the pirate vessel in the hacienda harbor lasted for several days, blowing great guns steadily.

The *goleta* rode it out well, for the harbor was well sheltered, but Lieutenant Orville and his men found themselves in strange quarters and did not fare the best, for the craft was short of stores and in a wretched condition, for she badly needed repairs.

There was no sending the boat ashore for the three days, and the lugger's return accompanied by the schooner-of-war from the lagoon was not looked for until the storm blew over.

In the hacienda there was sunshine in spite of the storm, for the captain was pronounced not fatally wounded, and the half-dozen men also the recipients of Don Ramon's kind hospitality were doing well.

The captain had bled so freely that he was very weak, but not one of the three wounds had been more than serious, but from the loss of blood.

He had rallied quickly and was glad to learn that the *goleta* was his prize, but distressed to know that the beautiful yacht had been run off with by the pirates.

The half-dozen prisoners who were on board the *goleta* told Lieutenant Lamonte

that their captain must have at least a dozen men on the captured yacht with him, for more than that number had sprung into the sea, and they were all good swimmers, while their chief had doubtless had in view capturing the Sea Arrow when he had pretended to be fatally wounded.

The storm at last broke away and the cruiser came into port, followed by the lugger, and dropped anchor near the *goleta*.

The Sea Soldier was certainly a very trim and rakish vessel, with a crew of ninety men and the look of a very fast sailer.

The crew were jubilant over the capture of the Lagoon Rover, but distressed by the wounding of their young captain, who was the ideal of his men.

But they were glad to know that he was in such hospitable quarters and that Surgeon Emory reported his condition most favorable for a speedy recovery.

As for the gallant young commander his lot had indeed been cast, in a pleasant place, for the hacienda was a home of luxury and refinement, and both the Don and Rachel proved most devoted nurses.

When able to talk over the affair, Captain Dave stated that he had been hunting along the shore when he had seen the chase, and hastening up the lagoon to where his cruiser lay he had manned the boats and gone to the rescue.

That Lamonte would dare to carry his threat into execution against Rachel, he did not for a moment believe, so he held on straight for the pirate craft, and as he had surmised the threatened fearful execution of the maiden proved but a bold game to keep off an attack.

He had been wounded at the first fire of the pirates, but did not heed it, and the bayonet wound would have been fatal had not Lieutenant Orville shot the pirate ere he could kill him.

It was Lamonte himself who had given him the sword-thrust, and in return he had wounded the pirate captain, though just how seriously he could not say.

One thing Captain Dare declared it his intention to do, and that was to hunt down Lamonte and retake the yacht for the Don.

The latter, however, regarded the capture of his yacht lightly, so glad was he at the rescue of his daughter.

For the American captain and his men he could not do too much, and Cecil Dare was told to make the hacienda harbor his anchorage as long as he was upon the Mexican Coast.

This it soon became evident that he intended to do, for the Sea Soldier was hauled into a lagoon for a thorough overhauling, while the lugger was dispatched to Vera Cruz for certain supplies and stores needed.

The *goleta*, under a prize crew, and Lieutenant Orville's command, was sent to New Orleans with the pirate prisoners, wounded and unhurt, and the Sea Soldier was to pick them up again off the Balize from a pilot boat, in which they would cruise until their vessel came after them.

Of course this close intimacy between Rachel Ravera and the handsome young American captain could end in but one way—the falling in love of the wounded officer with his beautiful nurse.

What Rachel thought of him, Cecil Dare could not divine, for she was not one to carry her heart upon her sleeve, and a Mexican, she was naturally something of a coquette.

But when the time drew near for him to bid farewell to the hospitable host and his daughter, Cecil Dare told Rachel of his love and asked if she were heart whole and fancy free.

"I am not, senor," she said demurely and a deep pain shot into the heart of the young officer.

"Then you are pledged to another?" he sadly said.

"No, senor."

"You said that your heart was not your own, senorita?"

"Yes, and I told the truth, for it is yours, senor," was the low response.

The following day Cecil Dare set sail in his schooner to hunt down the captured yacht, but he departed a very happy man, for Rachel Ravera had promised some day to become his wife.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PIRATE-HUNTER.

THE Sea Soldier sailed from the hacienda harbor with the pleasure and regret commingled of her captain.

He was glad to go upon the track of the Rover of the Lagoons, and regretted that he had to leave his beautiful lady-love even for a short season.

At his urgent request the Don had thrown up an earthwork upon one arm of the pass into the harbor and mounted thereon half a dozen guns which he had sent the lugger to Vera Cruz to get for him.

The *vaqueros* and servants of the ranch were drilled in the use of the guns, and a couple of men were to be kept constantly on duty in the little port, to give warning of a coming vessel, so that the hacienda could not be taken by surprise, for that the pirate Lamonte would again come to carry off the heiress, Cecil Dare did not doubt.

During his stay in the harbor Captain Dare had had the schooner fully repaired, and she sailed in shipshape condition.

She had been put in commission to go upon a special service along the Gulf shores and in the West Indian waters, and thus far the young commander had rendered able and distinguished services.

He had gone to the Balize after leaving the hacienda, and picked up Lieutenant Orville and his men, which again gave him a full crew, and then he had set sail in search of the Rover of the Lagoons.

Reports were heard from various vessels of the captured yacht being at the lawless acts of the *goleta*, for Lamonte had readily found a crew, and with a swifter and better vessel was becoming bolder in his deeds of piracy.

The Lagoon Pirates, as a rule, were content to remain in-shore and pounce out upon any vessel which stood in within a few leagues of the land.

Once they had captured a craft and retreated to their lair in the bayous and lagoons, and it was almost impossible to find them, and many an unfortunate craft had disappeared, and crew never been heard of, who, if the truth were known, had fallen into the clutches of these "Shore Buccaneers" and "Lagoon Rovers," as they were called.

With the fleet-sailing yacht under him, Lamonte had extended his cruises far out into the Gulf, and his red deeds were making him dreaded from Yucatan to the Balize.

Thrice had the Sea Soldier come in sight of the daring Lagoon Rover, to lose him again.

The first time it was but a few leagues off the coast, and the Rover had fled to his lair and all search for him was of no avail.

The second time he had been sighted in a storm, with night coming on, and the *goleta* had been lost in the darkness and tempest in spite of the close watch kept upon the cruiser, while the third time the light breeze blowing enabled the pirate to fairly out-foot the Sea Soldier.

But the American captain did not give up hope, and one afternoon put into Vera Cruz, hoping to learn something from rumors floating around of the Rover of the Lagoon.

He went ashore alone, enjoyed his wine and dinner at the hotel *cafe* and then sought the Monte Casino to pass away a few hours of the evening in watching the gambling always to be seen there.

It was Cecil Dare, therefore, who had attracted the attention of Captain Almo Urbana, the Mexican officer, and his companion, Senor Luis Escalon, a banker of the town, and who had followed him to the Monte Casino, as has been seen, for the purpose of drawing him into a quarrel which would end fatally for him, and thus give the Mexican officer a chance to win the heiress and beauty, Senorita Ravera.

The Monte Casino was a gorgeous *salon*, where the wealthy and fashionable Mexicans went to tempt the Goddess of Luck in games of chance and cards.

When the American officer entered it was not to play, for he seldom did so, except as a means of temporary amusement and never for gain only.

He left his hat and side-arms with the door-keeper, for such was the rule of the place, and strayed leisurely among the brilliantly lighted saloons.

A perfect stranger, he had no one to speak to, but his striking appearance soon riveted

every eye, but of this he seemed wholly unconscious, and soon became interested in regarding a game at one of the tables where the stakes were large and fortune going all one way.

As he stood thus, a gentleman approached, and saluting politely, said:

"Pardon, senor, but you are a stranger I see, and it would give me pleasure to have you join our party in a game of cards, if you will."

The American turned, and after a moment of hesitation, consented, saying:

"My name is Cecil Dare, senor, and I command the American cruising schooner Sea Soldier, now in your harbor."

"May I ask whom I have the honor of meeting?"

"Luis Escalon is my name, Senor Captain, and I am a banker of Vera Cruz."

"But I have heard of you, senor, as the famous Pirate-Hunter of the Gulf, and my country owes you thanks for services of value as well as your own; but come, let us join my friends and we will become better acquainted over a game of cards."

Cecil Dare accompanied the Mexican to a secluded alcove, where he was presented to several gentlemen, one of whom was Captain Almo Urbana of the Mexican cavalry.

The Mexicans greeted him cordially, and after some little conversation two of the party sat down to a game of cards, for the others had declined to play when Captain Urbana named the sum he desired to risk.

These two men were the Mexican officer and Cecil Dare the Pirate-Hunter.

CHAPTER XII.

FORTUNE'S FAVORITE.

It had not been the intention of Cecil Dare to play cards, as has been said, when he entered the Monte Casino.

He knew no one and was content to be a looker-on, hoping meanwhile to pick up from the floating conversation some news of the late doings of the Rover of the Lagoons and other Mexican pirates, for he knew that any recent acts of lawlessness, would doubtless be talked over where a large number of men were gathered together, many of them ship-owners.

When approached by the handsome banker, whose manners were elegant and appearance refined, he yielded to the request to become one of a party of players.

But when the sum named by Almo Urbana as a stake was five hundred pesos, all had at once said they cared not to venture so much.

"You, Escalon, surely do not draw out, for you have all the money in Vera Cruz in your vaults?" said Captain Urbana banteringly.

"Yes, but the money is only in my keeping, and I hardly care to risk of my own so large a sum on the turn of a card," responded Escalon quietly, although he had been the one to stake the officer and suggest the naming of a large sum, knowing that the others would draw out, while he added:

"If the American does, then he has not the nerve of his countrymen whom I have met."

"And you, Senor Captain Dare, will not back out for fear of losing a few pesos?" said Urbana, and his words and manner would have made a man of less nerve than Cecil Dare accept the gauntlet thus thrown down to him.

"Certainly I will play, senor, and you can make the sum larger if you will," was the cool reply, and Senor Urbana winced under it, as he knew he had to depend upon his banker friend only for money to play with.

But Escalon was in for it, and knowing that the Mexican officer was a finished player and universally lucky, he said:

"I hope, Captain Urbana, you will not follow our example and withdraw in alarm at the stakes?"

Thus encouraged Captain Urbana replied:

"Oh, no, I will play for any stake, but would prefer to begin with five hundred."

The American bowed and took his seat opposite to the Mexican, and the others gathered about the two players with deepest interest in the game.

Captain Dare was a rich man, he had also a handsome sum in prize money to his credit; so was not to be backed out for fear of losing a few thousands, especially when the game

seemed to have been reduced to an international one of America against Mexico, and the players in the service of their respective countries.

He was a bold player, too, and fortune often smiled on him, so he had no fear of the result, and his pride of nationality determined him upon making a brave fight for victory.

He drew from an inner pocket a wallet well filled with bank-notes of large denomination and placed a bill for five hundred pesos upon the table.

It was at once covered by the Mexican officer with the same amount and the game was begun with the cool deliberation of men who knew that it was to be one upon the result of which much was depending, for somehow it came into the mind of Cecil Dare that the man before him was a dangerous adversary.

The game ended with Captain Dave remarking:

"You play well, Senor Captain Urbana, but I am Fortune's favorite thus far."

"Shall we double the stake next time?"

Urbana glanced quickly up at Luis Escalon and replied:

"Yes, senor, if you wish it so."

The second game ended as the first, and the American raked over his winnings with the air of one who found more pleasure in winning the victory than in pocketing the money.

"I will stake what I have won on the next game, Captain Urbana," said Cecil Dare.

"If Senor Escalon will cash my draft on his bank, certainly, for I have no more cash with me at present," said the Mexican.

"Certainly, Captain Urbana," replied the banker, tossing a roll of bills upon the table.

The third game was but a repetition of the other two, and the Mexican drew a long breath and his face paled as he said:

"Senor Americano, just one more game with you, please, that I may discover if you are still Fortune's favorite."

The tone and manner were far from pleasant, and all saw that the Mexican captain was getting into an ugly humor.

But the American was perfectly cool and replied:

"Name your stake, Senor Mexicano," and there was a spice of sarcasm in the way in which he followed the style of Captain Urbana and called him by his nationality.

"Two thousand pesos, senor."

"Any sum pleases me, senor," and Cecil Dare quietly placed the sum named upon the table, while Captain Urbana again borrowed from the banker.

"Fortune still smiles upon me, Captain Urbana," said the American as he won the fourth game.

"It is not *Fortune*, Senor Americano," replied the Mexican, and there was no mistaking his look and words.

"May I ask for an explanation of your words, Senor Urbana?" sternly said Cecil Dare.

"My explanation of your winning, senor, is that you play the game of a card sharp," came the words, clearly and sneeringly uttered.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHALLENGE.

CAPTAIN ALMO URBANA was a man to be feared, and many of his acquaintances held dread of him.

He was well born, priding himself upon his ancient lineage and that the blood of the Montezumas flowed in his veins.

He had been left two fortunes, and one had been quickly run through with, while the last one was only possessed in name, as Banker Escalon held a claim upon it for money advanced, amounting to one-half its value.

The two men, Escalon and Urbana, had been midshipmen together when lads, and both resigned from the Mexican Navy when inheriting fortunes.

Escalon went into business and used his capital for making his fortune grow and was most successful.

Urbana got a lieutenantancy in the army and after half a dozen years became a captain of cavalry.

As his fortune dwindled away, rather than admit his poverty he had used the influence of his friends to get reappointed into the

navy, hoping to get a special command which would enable him to capture prizes enough to build up his wealth once more.

He decided upon this course after it came to his ears from a reliable source that the woman whom he loved, for herself as well as her riches, was engaged to an American.

He had received notification of his appointment being made, with orders to retain command of his company of cavalry until ordered to some vessel as a lieutenant.

He was thus in the army, and awaiting orders for service afloat when presented to the reader.

He was in the power of his cunning friend Escalon, who, to gain his ends did not hesitate at any means used.

Escalon was rich, very rich, and gold was his idol, so he was striving for more.

Captain Urbana was supposed to be a very rich man by all except the banker, who knew the situation even better than did the cavalryman as to just what he was worth.

A daring sailor, a splendid soldier, a dead shot and the best swordsman in Mexico as he was considered, Almo Urbana was feared as a dangerous man to encounter in a personal affair.

As a proof that this was true he had already engaged in half a dozen duels, several of which had been fatal.

Among women the handsome Mexican was a favorite and a hero, and men admired his dash and daring.

Such was the man who had so coolly accused Captain Cecil Dare the American sailor of being a card cheat.

Had Captain Urbana expected what would follow he would have been more careful; but he did expect that he would be instantly challenged by the American, and, as the reader is aware, that is just what he sought to have occur, for he had decided to both disgrace and kill his rival for Rachel Ravera's hand.

But hardly had he uttered the words when a clutch of iron was upon his throat, and in spite of his boasted strength he was bent backward until he groaned with pain, while stern and determined came the words:

"Retract that calumny, senor, or by Heaven I will crush every bone in your body."

"Retract it I say!"

All were astounded, and none more so than was Banker Escalon, for the strength of the Mexican captain was proverbial.

Now he knew that the American handled him with an ease that he had not deemed it possible for a giant to do, and that he meant just what he said he was certain.

All stood in breathless silence, and after a quick movement about the table Senor Escalon said:

"Captain Urbana, your temper got the best of your reason, and you owe it to Captain Dare to retract your words."

It was a getting out place for Almo Urbana, yet why the banker had so quickly switched over he could not tell; but he said hoarsely:

"I do beg your pardon, Captain Dare, and retract my foolish charge against you."

"You are wise, senor," and with this the American released his steel-like grip, half throwing the Mexican from him as he did so.

Captain Urbana quickly recovered himself, and said, now with a face livid from his deep anger, for he had received a hint from the banker:

"I asked your pardon, Captain Dare, because I feel that I did wrong you; but no man places his hand upon me whom I do not hold answerable for the act."

"That means, senor, that you wish me to give you satisfaction?"

"It does, sir."

"I but punished you for your insult, senor, and would be glad to let the one cancel the other, if you please."

"You admit, then, that you fear to meet me?"

The American laughed, but replied:

"My dear senor, when I meet a man whom I actually fear, with my own hand will I take my life, for there would be no charm for me in living."

"Then why not give me the satisfaction I demand?"

"Do you make it a demand?"

"I do."

"Very well, senor, I am wholly at your

service, and will be glad to see your representative on board my vessel to-morrow, to meet my first officer, whom I will present to him."

"To-morrow will not do, sir, for I am under orders, so I will name Senor Valverde as my second, and he will speak to you now upon the subject."

The one named Valverde was a gambler-gentleman, and a man whose affairs of honor were most numerous.

He was a bold gambler, and just as bold a duelist, and his friends were wont to say that he enjoyed a deadly encounter.

He smiled and bowed at the compliment paid him by Captain Urbana, and remarked: "I shall be glad to ask Captain Dare his pleasure in this matter?"

"It is to fight, sir, as the alternative is forced upon me," was the calm reply of the American.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FALSE FRIEND.

THE gambler, Valverde, smiled blandly at the reply of the American, and said in his even, low tones:

"Then I shall be pleased to have the senor name his second."

"I have no friend in your town, so must refer you to an officer of my vessel, Lieutenant Henry Orville."

"But, my dear senor, that will needs put the affair off later than to-morrow, and my principal has duties calling him away early in the morning," urged the gambler.

"Permit me to offer my services, Senor Captain Dare, for I it was who brought you into this unfortunate position," said Senor Escalon, with real feeling in voice and look.

"It is much to ask of a stranger, sir."

"Do not so consider me, senor, and permit me to say that I will serve you with pleasure, while I am not a stranger to the code *duello*."

"I thank you, sir, and will accept your services in the same spirit that you tender them."

The Mexican banker bowed and asked:

"As the challenged party may I ask if you have any preference of weapons?"

"None, sir; swords or pistols are either satisfactory, and you will find me at the Plaza Hotel, for I will not return on board my vessel to-night."

With this Captain Dare bowed to those present and turned away, leaving the *salon* soon after.

Half an hour after Banker Escalon, found him seated in a pleasant room at the Plaza Hotel writing a letter, while one just addressed lay upon the table near him.

"Be seated, Senor Escalon, and have supper with me, for I have ordered it, anticipating the pleasure of your society."

"I thank you, senor, I will join you with pleasure! but let me say that all is arranged."

"That is satisfactory, and let me say that here are these letters which if aught befalls me, I will esteem it a favor to have you take them aboard my vessel and deliver them to my first officer, Lieutenant Orville."

"It will give me pleasure, senor, to carry out any wish of yours," and the Mexican wondered that no question was asked him about the arrangements for the duel.

As supper was brought, and a good one it was, and Cecil Dare asked nothing about the affair on hand, and conversed in a way that seemed to indicate that it was not in his thoughts, the Mexican at last said:

"Permit me to tell you now, senor, about this unfortunate meeting."

"Ah, yes, you said it was all arranged?"

"Yes, sir, for the morning at sunrise, on the harbor road."

"That is satisfactory, senor, and I thank you."

"He does not even ask about the weapons," the banker thought, so said aloud:

"I selected swords, senor."

"Certainly, they give a chance for a man to be merciful if he so desires."

"I fear you will find Captain Urbana merciless, senor."

"Then he does not belie his looks."

"No, and he has had a number of fatal affairs, and never spares an adversary—I say this to put you on your guard."

"Thank you, senor."

"If rapiers fail, and a second meeting is

demanded, the weapons will be pistols, at ten paces."

"There will be no need of the pistols, Senor Escalon; but it is well to have them in reserve."

"May I not order you a room here for the night?"

"No, thanks, I have my own quarters, and will call for you at dawn."

"I'll be ready, senor; but I will have to impose upon your kindness for weapons, as I have only my sword ashore, and it is too rough to send off to my vessel for rapiers."

"I have them, senor, and will bring them," and Senor Escalon took his departure.

Straight back to the Monte Casino he went, and Captain Urbana seeing him enter, sought a private alcove.

"Well?" he said, eagerly.

"The American accepts all arrangements."

"Then he is a dead man, Escalon."

"Yes, but he is a cool hand with a blade, I am sure, and you will have to be careful."

"I have no dread of the result, Escalon."

"Nor I, though he may be dangerous."

"Not to me, for I shall disarm him and run him through the breast."

"The fortune of the fair Senorita Ravera is worth a dozen lives."

"True; but was he not nervous over meeting me?"

"Not in the least did he appear so."

"He cannot have heard of my skill."

"No, of course not, as he has no friends here."

"Well, he will soon know what I can do, and then the field is clear for me to win the Senorita Ravera."

"Yes, but it is unfortunate about the money he won."

"Isn't it?"

"I declare I never saw such luck, and he plays as coolly as a professional."

"He played well enough to win, and held the cards to do so."

"Yes, after you had arranged the cheat cards, too."

"I had all ready to spring the proof of his cheating upon those around when he made the threat he did to you."

"He would have killed me then and there had I not retreated."

"He certainly would, for I saw it in his face; he was so incensed by your charge that he meant you should retreat or die."

"And such strength I never knew mortal man possessed."

"He handled you as though you were a child."

"Yes, I was powerless in his grasp, and you know the great strength I possess."

"I do, and if his skill with a blade is equal to his strength and nerve you will have to be very careful to better him."

"I have no fear when a sword is in my hands."

"I know you and have confidence in you; but should he prove your superior?"

"He cannot."

"I say should he do so?"

"Ah! I do not wish to be killed."

"No, of course not, and Valverde must be bought over to do as we deem best."

"Of course."

"Then I will arrange all, and of course if he falls, whether by your sword, or not, it will be in a duel, you see."

"I will now go and see Valverde, and the banker took his leave."

CHAPTER XV.

THE DUEL.

THE spot chosen for the duel was a secluded one, outside the city limits, and in a chaparral near the shore.

Thither a vehicle drove in the early dawn, and in it were but two persons, Banker Escalon and the American officer, Cecil Dare.

For reasons best known to himself, Banker Escalon had preferred to do his own driving, so had not brought a servant along.

"This is the spot, and don't let me make you nervous by saying that Captain Urbana has already killed two men here."

"It does not make me nervous, senor," was the quiet response.

The weapons were then taken from the vehicle, the horses tied to a tree and the two men awaited the coming of the Mexican

officer and his second, for they were first upon the field.

The scene was a picturesque one, a dense undergrowth landward upon the sand dunes, and the Gulf and silvery shore in the other direction with the town in the distance and harbor dotted with vessels, while not far away the grim walls of the San Juan d'Uloa arose in all their gloom and strength.

Just as the sun appeared above the horizon, another vehicle appeared in sight and it contained also but two persons.

It was drawn by but one horse and was Captain Urbana's own rig, and he held the reins.

"He makes a mistake to tire himself by driving that hard-mouthed and spirited horse, when he will need his sword arm well rested," said Cecil Dare to the banker.

"Yes, a man should not do aught to exhaust himself on the eve of a combat," responded Escalon.

The two new-comers now sprung from their vehicle, the mule was securely tied and they advanced to where the banker and American stood.

Henrico Valverde, the gambler, carried the weapons, and they saluted as they came up.

The American bowed haughtily and quietly watched the two seconds as they measured the respective blades and talked apart together, while Captain Urbana stood in the foreground of the little spot, gazing upon the scene before him rather than recalling the sad memories of his former visits to that same spot.

Soon the two principals were placed in position, the swords handed to them, and the seconds took their stands on either side.

Captain Urbana was perfectly cool, his cuff turned back to allow his wrist full play, and upon his face was a confident smile, without a shadow visible or a doubt in his mind.

The American was calm to indifference, for he seemed more like one who expected to enter upon a friendly bout than a man who faced one who he knew meant to take his life if possible.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" asked gambler Valverde, who had won the word.

Both of the men bowed, and quickly the order followed:

"Cross swords!"

The blades, superb weapons they were, too, came together with a sharp ring that made the sparks fly, and quicker than a flash, the Mexican made his favorite and splendid lunge.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it would have ended the fight then and there; but it was met by a parry so skillful and quick, yet so easily executed, that the Mexican whitened a little, for he knew then and there that he had met his equal with the sword.

Again he tried his quick and unexpected tactics, to be again as skillfully foiled, and in less than a minute he received a cut on the cheek which he knew had been mercifully given, as the American could have pierced his throat, had he so wished.

The blood of the Mexican was now at fury heat, and his pride was touched, for his quick glance told him that both the banker and the gambler were amazed that he should have met his match.

A glance into the face of the American showed, too, that he was in no manner disturbed by the combat, and with all his fierceness and skill combined, he began to press him to kill him.

The American met him with a skill equally his own, defended himself perfectly, and when he saw that the strength of the Mexican was failing, he began to press him deliberately, and at last said, in his calm way:

"You are fatigued, senor, so lower your blade and rest if you will, or consider yourself beaten, and let this affair end without fatality."

"Never!" shouted the Mexican, and again he began the attack more fiercely than before.

The play of the American was grand, and the two lookers-on were lost in amazement and admiration.

They saw that he was simply amusing himself with the man who had proven himself on scores of occasions the best swordsman in Mexico.

At last he sent the sword of the Mexican flying upward, and as it came down caught the hilt, with the dexterity of a sleight-of-

hand performer, reversed it quickly, and handed it to the defeated man with the remark:

"Accept your sword and your life from me, Captain Urbana, and permit me to say that I am glad this affair ends thus, as I have often heard you spoken of most pleasantly by our mutual friends, Don Ramon Ravera and his daughter."

The reference to these two caused the white face of the Mexican to crimson, and he said savagely:

"I refuse to accept either my sword or my life at your hands, Senor American, and demand that you face me with pistols."

"As you please, senor, but violent exercise is not conducive to aid in deadly aim," was the cool response, and Cecil Dare turned upon his heel to walk toward his second, when seizing his sword, which his adversary had thrown upon the ground, he sprung toward his generous foe to run him through the back.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BOY AS AN ALLY.

HAD Cecil Dare suspected the treacherous act of the Mexican officer he could not have acted more quickly or boldly than he did, for he sprung to one side, wheeled and had his sword at a guard in a second of time.

With the experience of his foe's skill and nerve which he had had, Captain Urbana did not rush to the attack as he otherwise would have done.

He was so cautious that he did not let his temper get the better of his reason, though he was furious that his intended assassination had been so cleverly foiled.

Did he rush upon the American he knew that the result would be quickly against him.

He even dreaded that his dastard act might cause the American to attack him, and in his fear called out:

"Come, Valverde and Escalon, and end this affair now."

Valverde bounded to his side, seizing one of the four swords brought, while, grasping the other, Banker Escalon took up position upon the other side of the officer.

To their surprise he did not retreat but stood his ground and Cecil Dare said in his quiet way:

"So, this is your game, is it, senor?"

"Well, after all the odds may not be so dangerous as they look."

Both Escalon and Valverde were fine swordsmen, and, as they circled around with Captain Urbana they got in front of the American to seaward. He was thus in the open space in the thicket and could not retreat if he would, so must stand at bay and be killed, unless he triumphed over the three.

The Mexicans, also armed with pistols, held them in their left hands, thus having Cecil Dare wholly at their mercy.

Still he did not change color, nor did he lose his indifferent manner toward the now deadly peril he had to face.

What would have been the result of these fearful odds cannot be told; but, just as the four men stood there in silence, the one at bay against three, he suddenly said:

"We are to have witnesses to this combat, senors, it seems—more of your kind, doubtless."

The Mexicans started, turned and beheld five persons present, who had suddenly come around the thicket into full view.

Four of these were in the dress of American sailors, and the fifth, who appeared to be the leader, was a mere lad attired in the picturesque costume of a Mexican youth.

The sailors were armed, but the lad showed no weapon as he came forward and said:

"Captain Dare, I am just in time to prevent your being murdered."

"Ah, my lad, I saw you last night as a page at the Monte Casino?" cried Dare, and he added:

"I do indeed owe you my life, my brave youth."

"I saw you, sir, at the Casino, where I have been a page for months, though I am an American. I overheard the plot of Senor Escalon and Senor Valverde to kill you if you got the best of Captain Urbana; so I went out to your vessel before dawn, and told the officer that you ordered four men sent ashore with me, and I brought them

here with all haste. My advice is to let them kill these three Greaser assassins right here."

Dare laughed and said:

"No, my lad, I cannot take your advice, though they richly deserve punishment," and turning to the three Mexicans, who were silent and pallid as they stood under cover of the muskets of the four seamen, he continued:

"Senors, you have heard how this brave lad saved me from your intended assassination, and my advice to you is to get into your vehicles and drive with all haste back to the city, where, if I hear one whisper of the charge you made against me last night, Captain Urbana, I will make public the infamous perfidy of all three of you toward me here."

"You, Senor Urbana, will bear my mark to your grave. I advise you all to be off at once, or I may be tempted to put my hand upon you, Senors Valverde and Escalon also. Go, senors!"

He stepped aside and the three Mexicans at once started for their vehicles, when Banker Escalon turned and said:

"Senor Dare, I wish to say to you that the charge of that boy against me is false!"

"If so, then why did you as my second, attack me, when you should have been my friend?"

"Yes, his charge is false!" shouted Valverde, adding:

"I punished the boy once for disobedience, and this story is all for his revenge."

Seizing a musket from one of the sailors, the lad leveled it and said:

"Now, you hurry up, senor, or I'll pull trigger, and which one of you the bullet finds I don't care."

The Mexicans muttered bitterest imprecations, but lost no further time in talk, and hastened to depart, the lad raising his sombrero in mock politeness as they drove away, while he called out:

"You better have that gash on your cheek attended to soon, Captain Urbana, or you'll lose all your good looks."

His mocking words, spoken in perfect Spanish, and his laughter echoed unpleasantly in their ears as they drove away.

"Now, my fine fellow, tell me just who you are, and how I find you a page in a Mexican gambling hall?" and Cecil Dare turned to the lad, who answered in his light-hearted way:

"Oh, I am only a Boy Waif, sir, drifting about the world—that is all."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BOY WAIF.

THE reply of the lad touched the young commander to the heart, and he gazed into his face with renewed interest.

In spite of his indifferent, almost saucy air, he could see behind it a tenderness and intelligence beyond his years.

His face was simply too handsome for a boy, and masses of short golden curls clustered all over his head.

His eyes were large, dark blue and shaded by long lashes, and more perfect white teeth he had never beheld.

There was a spirit of mischief about the corners of his mouth, but there was a look of indomitable pluck and character also, commingling well with his Devil-I-care air.

His costume was of the Mexican dress, rich and jauntily worn, and his form was slight but well knitted together and graceful.

Captain Dare had observed him at the Casino the night before, and struck by his appearance and the fact that he must be an American, intended speaking with him, but the trouble which followed had caused him to forget to do so.

"You are a waif, you say?" he said kindly.

"Yes, sir, a Boy Waif."

"What is your name, my lad?"

"Call me Clover, sir."

"That is not your real name then?"

"No, sir," was the frank reply.

"Where is your home?"

"Anywhere, everywhere, sir."

"At present you are living in Vera Cruz?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you are an American."

"Yes, sir."

"How would you like to be a sailor?"

"I am a sailor, sir, and I love the sea."

"You have some education?"

"A very fair one, sir, for my years."

"Then I will offer you a berth with me as secretary until I can do something better for you."

"Will you take it?"

"Yes, sir, with pleasure."

"Now tell me how you came to help me as you did?"

"I overheard Senor Escalon and Captain Urbana talking together, after he came from visiting you, for I saw the trouble about the cards, and then I heard the banker tell Gambler Valverde of the little game the three were to play against you."

"That decided me to act to save you, so I went out to your vessel about an hour before dawn."

"In all that blow?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you go in?"

"A sail *punta*, sir."

"And he handled it, sir, like an old tar," said one of the seamen, saluting politely.

"I told you, sir, I was an old salt," said the lad.

"And then?"

"I told the officer in command a lie."

"A lie?"

"Yes, sir, for I didn't wish to tell him of your trouble, so said that you wished to arrest an American prisoner ashore and to send with me four seamen well armed were your orders."

"I see."

"When we reached the shore I told the men the truth and we started for this place, which I had to find from what I had heard of it, and I am glad we came in time, sir."

"Well, my lad, you have made me your friend for life."

"What has driven you from your home, to become a wanderer about the world, is not my affair, but so long as you will remain with me I will befriend you."

"Now we will go aboard ship."

"Did you not leave your traps at the hotel, sir?"

"Yes, and some letters, which I now wish to secure, and I thank you for the reminder," and the captain led the way to the little cove where the boat had been left.

"Take the tiller ropes, Clover," said the commander, and acting as coxswain the lad gave the orders to "give way" and the boat started upon its way up to the town.

"My lads, get you some grog and breakfast, for I will be gone an hour at least," and Cecil Dare handed the men several gold *onzas* apiece and walked away accompanied by Clover, leaving the four seamen lost in delight at their good fortune."

"I say, Jack, that's the best man I ever trod a deck with," said one.

"He do be so, mate, for he are liberal, and a gent from keel ter truck," answered Jack.

"Yas, and he knows more about handlin' a ship than most commodores I has sailed under," said another.

"And would fight a frigate with a sloop-o'-war," the youth added.

"And thet lad are a-goin' ter make his mark," said Jack.

"He'll tread the quarter-deck, with straps on his shoulders, some day."

"You bet he will, and he's a gentleman to boot."

"He do seem so, though he looks like a pretty gal."

"Waal, we was in luck ter be sent with him, for we holds five gold *onzas* each and the captain's good will for our being on board ter help him."

"If it hadn't been for the pistols them Mexikins had, the capt'in would hev jist made ther three of 'em strike their colors," said Jack.

"Yes, he would; but I is glad the lad got us there in time."

Such was the conversation that followed the departure of the captain and the lad, after which the four honest tars walked over to where they could get a square meal, and something good to wash it down with.

In the mean time the officer and the lad had gone on to the hotel, where the former had ordered a good breakfast, which both sat down together to enjoy.

"Senor, may I ask if you expect to remain in port long?" asked the lad.

"I may remain a couple of days, as I am

anxious to make certain discoveries, if possible."

"I know this place, sir, thoroughly, and its people, too, and I advise you to appear only by day, for your life is not worth a *peso* if you walk the streets by night—nor mine, either, for that matter, after what I did this morning to thwart those three Mexicans."

"Your advice is good, my lad, and I shall be careful; but now I am going to take you into my confidence, and see if you cannot give me certain information I seek, so come with me to my room," and Cecil Dare led the way to his room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TRIO OF CONSPIRATORS.

THE first thing which Captain Urbana did upon reaching the town was to drive to his rooms and send for his surgeon, while his two companions sought their quarters, all promising to breakfast together at a later hour.

"Rivas, is this infernal wound going to leave a scar?" asked the Mexican captain when his surgeon appeared.

"It was done over an hour ago and has bled freely, I see," said Surgeon Rivas.

"I asked you if it would leave a scar?" hotly said the officer.

"As a matter of course, *senor*, a cut an inch deep and from the cheek-bone to the lower jaw will leave a very ugly scar," responded the surgeon, with more satisfaction at giving pain for the manner in which he had been spoken to.

"Can you not prevent its disfiguring my face with all your boasted art of a surgeon?" said Captain Urbana in the same angry tone.

"I will do all in my power, *senor*, and leave it for other surgeons to say how my work was performed."

"*Caramba!* why don't you set to work about it then?"

The surgeon smiled blandly and went to work, and he had the revengeful pleasure of making the irate captain wince under his hand far oftener than there was any need for.

But the wound was stitched together and dressed, and Captain Urbana was very coolly informed that the scar would disfigure his handsome face badly.

He uttered imprecations both loud and deep and then turned to greet his two companions in guilt who just then entered, while the surgeon asked innocently:

"Was there any rust on the sword point, Captain Urbana? for if so I fear you may have trouble."

"Who said it was a wound made by a sword, sir?" shouted the captain.

"My experience with wounds, *senor*, tells me that it could have been made by nothing else," was the reply.

"Well, it was a sword that did it."

"Well, *senor*, it is doubtless nothing to the wound you gave your adversary, for your sword must have entered his heart."

"No, sir; I spared him," was the angry retort; and the surgeon took his leave, smiling blandly at the fact that in his own way he had gotten satisfaction for the captain's insulting manner toward him.

The breakfast was secured in the officers' pleasant quarters, but Captain Urbana did more swearing than eating, as his face pained him at every movement of his jaws.

Then the servant was dismissed, and Captain Urbana said warmly as he turned toward his guests:

"Well, what do you think of this?"

"A more marvelous hand with a sword I never saw," Valverde returned.

"Does any one know that better than I do?"

"I meant what is to be done about it."

"The American will doubtless go on board his vessel and set sail," said the banker.

"Not he, for he is not one to leave the place until he knows what is said of this duel."

"I guess you are right, *Senor Urbana*; he will wish to know if he is to be accused in any way," Valverde remarked.

"Then our best course is to frankly say that a duel came off and you were wounded, captain."

"Can we not keep that from being known, Escalon?"

"Your wound shows for itself, and I see no other way out of it."

"Well, let us go the whole string then, state that I accused the American of being a card-sharp, but convinced of my error, offered an apology, and then challenged him for striking me and in the duel I was wounded."

"This will be the better way, if I read your idea aright," said Escalon.

"How do you read me?"

"Why, if the American remains here a few days, no one would suspect you, after frankly admitting the whole affair, if he lost his life in some way."

"Yes, about that; but I was also thinking of meeting him again *with pistols*."

"Do you value your life, *Senor Urbana*?"

"As dearly as any man."

"Then don't throw it away."

"How do you mean?"

"That man is as good a shot as he is a swordsman, and has the quickest eye and movement I ever saw."

"He would kill you before you could pull the trigger."

"You seem to forget that I am a dead-shot."

"You were equally as noted as a swordsman."

"Well, what would you advise?"

"*Senor Valverde* here tells me he has an acquaintance in the Plaza Hotel."

"Well?"

"He is employed there, and as he owes his life to Valverde, he will be willing to do the work for a consideration."

"Kill the American?"

"Yes."

"That would be the best way, I guess."

"Yes, he could kill him in his room at night, and rob him, so that it would seem the work of a robber alone, who killed his victim when discovered at his thieving work."

"The very thing; but how much must this man be paid?"

"I think I can arrange it for a couple of thousand *pesos*," *Senor Valverde* said.

Captain Urbana glanced at the banker who said:

"I think you had best close the bargain with Valverde for the man to do the work."

"All right, please pay him for me, Escalon, and charge it to my account," said Captain Urbana with the air of a man who had a fortune at his command.

The money was counted out and Valverde soon after left to meet his man and arrange for the assassination of the American.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SECRET REVEALED.

SENOR HENRICO VALVERDE occupied an *outré* position in Vera Cruz.

He was well born, and had been educated for the priesthood, but falling from grace had disappeared for several years to return with considerable money, which he claimed to have gotten by striking it rich in the mountain gold mines.

He was admitted into society, because a favorite with army and navy officers, and soon drifted into the role of a professional gambler.

He lost heavily at times but it did not seem to affect his income, and he had made himself feared as a dangerous man.

His purse was open to his friends, and yet no man could boast of being intimate with him.

Brilliant when he wished to be, haughty toward all who felt that he was not a proper man to invite to their homes, and admired by women generally, he was yet a mystery to all.

Such was the man who had undertaken to find a "friend" who would put the American out of the way, for a consideration.

Going to his own sumptuous quarters, *Senor Valverde* sent a servant away with a message and then sat down to enjoy a cigar.

His home was a pleasant one, and a visitor was always struck with the number of servants employed there, and that they were from the country and not natives of the town.

While enjoying his cigar the messenger returned and reported the result of his errand, which was to the effect that the one sent for would follow immediately.

Soon after there glided into the room a man with a dark, cunning face and snake-like eyes that were never still.

"You wished me, captain?" he said almost in a whisper.

"Sit down, Juan."

The man obeyed, seating himself in an attitude of one about to spring upon a foe.

He was a large man, clad in the costume of the lower classes of Mexico, and looked like one possessed of giant strength.

"Juan, I have work for you to do."

"Yes, *Senor Captain*."

"First tell me if there is aught new to report."

"A stranger, an American captain of a vessel-of-war in port, is at the hotel, *Senor Captain*, and went away at dawn with *Senor Escalon* to fight a duel, I take it."

"He was at the Casino last night, Juan, and won heavily."

"Yes, *senor*."

"He has besides a large sum of money with him."

"It is well worth a risk, *senor*, to see how much."

"Yes, he must have several thousand *pesos* besides his winnings last night! but is he likely to stay long ashore?"

"He came back to breakfast and brought with him the boy who is a messenger at the Casino."

"Aha! Well, he will doubtless remain to-night ashore, and may visit the Casino again to-night, in which case you might waylay him upon his way back to the hotel."

"It would be safer in the hotel, *senor*, when he is asleep."

"Let me warn you that he is a man of great strength."

Juan the Mexican smiled in a confident way.

"Oh, I know you are a giant in strength, Juan, but this man is also one, for I saw him handle Captain Urbana last night as though he were a child."

Juan looked incredulous, and said:

"Can it be possible, *senor*, for you remember the night the *Senor Captain* was so intoxicated at the hotel I could barely hold him?"

"Yes, and so I warn you that this man will be your match."

Juan drew from beneath his jacket a long and ugly-looking knife.

"If this caresses the heart, *Senor Captain*, strength leaves at its first touch."

"Yes, and that is what you must do, for the man must die."

"I obey your command, *Senor Captain*."

"Plan well so as to get into no trouble, and what you get in value bring at once to me and we will divide equally."

"You are generous, *senor*, for my share is, as you know, but one-fifth."

"True, but in this case it will be one-half, if the man dies, as he must."

"Now what have you to report?"

"The rich *ranchero*, *Senor Delsarte* is in town."

"Ah, and when will he leave?"

"I am not certain, *senor*, but I will report."

"He always carries back with him a good sum of money to pay off his people."

"Yes, *senor*."

"Then I will post the men so as to be on the lookout for him, and when you know his hour of departure send me word so as to dispatch a man with him."

"Yes, *senor*; but have you other orders, my captain?"

"None, only don't let there be any failure about the American?"

"There shall be none, *Senor Captain*," and Juan again touched his villainous-looking knife as he arose and took his departure.

He had been ordered to do the red work, but his chief had made no mention in hand paid of the couple of thousand *pesos* which Banker Escalon had given him.

That was one of his own "perquisites," and he was to share as well in the plotted robbery of Cecil Dare, so that gambler Henrico Valverde was faring well from his connection with the duel between Captain Urbana and the American sailor.

"I am really winning well in my games," he mused, as Juan left him. "I have a couple of thousand clear in my pocket, and Juan will get at least ten thousand from the American, and perhaps more if he plays and wins to-night."

"Then old Delsarte will carry back a couple of thousand or more, and I get the lion's

share of that, if the cunning old fellow does not give me the slip, as he has on several occasions.

"It is a dangerous life I lead, but then the rewards are worth the risks," and he coughed recklessly, as though he enjoyed the peril overhanging him.

CHAPTER XX.

LAMONTE'S STRATEGY.

WHEN Lamont, the Rover of the Lagoons, met the attack of the blue-jackets, led by Captain Cecil Dare, he was suddenly confronted by the American leader when he had him wholly at his mercy.

Cecil Dare was wounded in the arm, when in his boat, and again in the shoulder by a bayonet in the hands of a pirate, while he was wielding his sword vigorously to keep back two men who were pressing him.

Just then Lamonte had rushed up and made a lunge at the gallant officer.

He felt his sword-point pierce the flesh, but at that instant beheld the face of the man into whose heart he had meant to drive his sword, and with a startled cry he shrunk back, and the blade never reached the life center.

In the crowd he was swept away along the deck, like a man who had been dealt a blow that stunned him.

His face was pallid and his hand trembled so that he could not use his sword.

In the confusion no one had observed his seeming recognition of Cecil Dare, and his manner following it.

Seeing that all was lost, and having received a slight bullet-wound in the head, he sunk to the deck, pretending to be in a state of unconsciousness, and was removed soon after to the cabin, believed to be fatally wounded.

He heard his men leaping into the sea, and at once he decided upon his course, and a second after had slipped out of the stern-ports into the sea.

"Come with me, men, and we'll seize the yacht, for a breeze is springing up," he said to several of his crew who were swimming near him.

They obeyed, and others were met with and told to follow, until they lengthened into a string of more than a dozen swimming men.

Here and there one went down, but the yacht was not far distant, and the most of them were bold, strong swimmers.

The few men left on the yacht were so wrapt up in gazing upon the scene on the *goleta*, that they did not observe the dark objects coming toward them upon the waters, and not until their forms began to appear over the bulwarks, and spring upon the decks, did they learn the truth.

A rush at the pirates, cries of alarm, a few shots, prayers and curses, and Lamonte had possession of Don Ramon's beautiful yacht.

Unmindful of their dripping condition the pirates rushed to their posts, obeyed the rapid orders of their indomitable leader, and the yacht glided away in the darkness as has been seen, and made good her escape.

"I have made a good exchange, Senor Rodriguez," said the pirate as his first officer came aft and joined him after the yacht's escape was assured.

"Yes, senor, and it is just like your bold spirit, to snatch victory from defeat."

"Thank you, Rodriguez, for the compliment; but this yacht is a trifle larger than our craft, can outsail her, is stanch as a frigate and needs only a larger armament and full crew."

"Which we can soon get, senor."

"Oh, yes, for we have a couple of score at the lagoon retreat to begin with and can rescue the others from vessels we capture."

"But we lose the treasure we had on the *goleta*."

"No, for we must retake our vessel and get it."

"But will it not have been taken ashore before we can do so, Captain Lamonte?"

"You forget that I have a secret closet on the *goleta* where the treasure is hidden away and which no one can find."

"I now recall the fact, senor."

"We can only lose the treasure by the foundering of the *goleta*, or her being de-

stroyed by fire, for those who have her will never discover the hiding-place."

"I am glad of that, Senor Captain, and it will make us doubly anxious to capture our old craft."

"Yes, Rodriguez, and we must do it," was the determined response of Lamonte.

"Which course now, captain?" asked Rodriguez soon after.

"To sea until we drop all pursuit from sight and then at once lay our course for the Lagoon Retreat."

"Yes, senor," and Officer Rodriguez gave the necessary orders, while Lamonte went into the cabin to take a survey of his prize.

The *goleta* was certainly a most beautiful craft, the cabin being fitted up with every luxury and the greatest elegance.

In her build and fitting out Don Ramon Ravera had spared no expense, and the result was that he had a stanch craft, one of phenomenal speed and a palatial sea home to dwell in.

Lamonte smiled delightedly to himself as he went about him, looking upon all sides, and coming to Don Ramon's cabin he found there some new purchases in the way of a wardrobe, which he quickly proceeded to attire himself in, and discard his wet clothing.

Another suit was laid out for Rodriguez and others, intended for the Don's crew of the yacht, then sent forward for the pirates.

In the way of stores there was an abundance, and of the best, for Don Ramon had intended taking an extended cruise northward with his daughter.

"With half a dozen more guns and a crew of eighty men I can cruise the seas where I will in this craft, yes, and it will enable me to yet get possession of that haughty beauty, Rachel Ravera, for I will not give her up—I swear it," and the face of the outlaw showed that he meant to keep his oath.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAIR OF THE LAGOON PIRATES.

THE captured yacht, as has been seen, dropped her pursuer from her wake very soon, but her captain still held on until all danger of recapture was out of the question.

"I don't like the looks of the clouds, Rodriguez," he said, when he again came on deck, after having discovered how valuable was the prize he had taken.

"Nor I, senor, for it looks as though it would be an ugly night," responded Rodriguez, who was an old sailor though a young man, he having passed his life upon the Gulf of Mexico and generally under a lawless flag.

"We have a new vessel, a crew pretty well broken down and very few of them, and I would rather not be caught in a tempest," said Lamonte, with some anxiety.

"We must do our best," was the pirate lieutenant's response, and he at once began to prepare the Sea Arrow to meet the storm.

It was not long in coming and it came with a vengeance.

A vessel less stanch than was the Sea Arrow, under the circumstances, would have been knocked down by the shock; but she met it bravely and Officer Rodriguez had the helm himself.

The cabin was closed, all hatches battened down, and everything made fast, while she met the gale under just sail enough to steady her.

The sea became so wild that at last Captain Lamonte put the vessel before the tempest and thus she drove along through the night.

At dawn she lay to, and thus the day passed, the beautiful vessel riding like a duck.

When night came on the wind switched around, and the yacht was put on her course to the retreat and went driving along before the storm like a frightened racer.

The next day the worn-out crew gave a cheer as land was sighted, and two hours after the Sea Arrow ran into a lagoon, the presence of which no one cruising near would suspect, as it entered the Gulf in an oblique way, the outer arm of land extending in a crescent and blending with the rest of the land so as to be unseen even at a couple of cables' length away.

The wind drove the vessel far into the la-

goon, until it no longer felt even that fierce wind blowing without, so sheltered it was.

Then a boat was gotten out ahead with six men at the oars, the sails were furled and the yacht towed lightly up the stream.

At length the boat came to a narrow and deep lagoon flowing into the main one, but here the channel was blocked by a couple of trees blown across it.

At least it so appeared, until the men landed on the left bank and a block and tackle was made fast to a rope wound like a grape-vine around a tree.

Then the other end was made fast to the tree fallen directly across the channel, and the force of the men raised one end slowly but surgly until it was high enough to permit the passage of the *goleta*.

Once by it was lowered again, and the upper tree was raised in the same manner, and on glided the *goleta* up the lagoon still towed by the boat out ahead.

As it advanced it came to where the channel was hardly wider than the vessel itself, and yet the boat ahead dragged her through every obstacle, to suddenly shoot out into a small inland lake.

Low upon the lagoon side, the shore gradually rose in height until on the opposite side it reached a considerable elevation, and there was visible a fort, showing several guns, commanding the approach.

A challenge now came from across the little lake, but Captain Lamonte answered, and the *goleta* shot out into the lake, and crossing to the other side, entered the mouth of a narrow but deep lagoon.

In fact, upon several sides were lagoons, which could be followed by circuitous routes, and eventually lead one back to the Gulf, so if attacked the pirates had a chance to escape from their foes.

Upon the bluff across the lake was the fort, of half a dozen old cannons, the largest being a thirty-two-pounder and the smallest a twelve.

Protected by the bluff and earthworks, the battery could play down upon a vessel coming up the lagoon, with plunging shots, and it would take a bold commander to advance under such a fire, with no protection to his craft or crew.

Back of the fort, upon the ridge, were a number of well-built cabins, and here was the lair of the Rovers of the Lagoons.

There were fully a hundred people assembled to see the *goleta*, but half of them were women and children, and a motley crowd they were.

Here dwelt the families of some of the outlaws, and they would defend their lawless homes and their people as tigers would their young.

A wail went up from women and children in the crowd, when Lamonte told them of the loss of his vessel and three-fourths of his men; but unheeding their sorrow, the chief went along the ridge to his own cabin, a stoutly-built structure, before the door of which sat a negro and negress.

"Well, Congoo, I am back again, you see, in spite of your black prophecies," said the chief, addressing the negress, who was a wild-looking old hag, dressed in scarlet velvet, wearing many jewels, and with a crown upon her head skillfully made of human bones.

"Yes, chief he back, but he bring woe and wail for dead men, and he did come near put he neck in noose, as Congoo say, and some day he think old black Hoedoo woman know when he had shadow of yard-arm fall on him."

"Quit your croaking, old woman, and prepare supper for me, for I am worn out and need rest," said the chief, sternly, as he entered the cabin, while the negress, still muttering strange prophecies, slowly obeyed his command.

Such was the home of Lamonte, the Rover of the Lagoons.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RED FLAG OF THE ROVER.

WHATEVER the fate that had cost the fortunes, or misfortunes rather, of Lamonte among the Rovers of the Lagoons, he certainly had proven himself an able commander.

They had been a lawless lot, whom he had disciplined into order, and they not only greatly admired their young chief, but had

every confidence in his skill as a sailor and his daring.

If he was cruel, he chimed in with their own humor, and because he had lost the *goleta*, they did not condemn him, but rejoiced that he had captured a better vessel, while they looked upon the dead of their number, and the prisoners, whom they did not doubt would be hanged, as having taken the chances to win, and lost.

The young chief ate his meal in silence, which the negress had prepared, and then taking a bugle from a peg on the cabin wall, blew five sharp, short blasts, ending with a long-drawn-out note.

Instantly the men of the retreat began to assemble before the cabin, and when all were gathered there, some threescore in number, Lamonte briefly told them of the loss of the *goleta* and capture of the beautiful yacht, adding:

"The craft I have is a far better one, and only needs an armament and full crew.

"I have with me Officer Rodriguez and twelve men, and from those here I can add enough to make my force number fifty.

"Then I shall give up coast-cruising and boldly sail the Gulf and seas for bigger game than can be caught elsewhere.

"Officer Rodriguez, you will pick out the men we need, and have the *Sea Arrow* ready to sail by noon to-morrow."

The pirates gave three cheers and departed, delighted at the chance of finding bigger game than coasters, and Officer Rodriguez picked out the ablest men of the lot and reported at noon the next day that the *Red Arrow* was ready to sail.

The chief gave to Bucksha, the old negro, his traps to take on board, and turning to the negress, said sneeringly:

"Well, you old black witch, what have you to prophesy evil in store for me this time?"

"Clouds obscure the sun to-day, master, and the stars did not shine last night, while I hear de sea moan pitiful on the beach away off, and de wind fairly cry in de pine trees all night long."

"Then you wish me to believe that all this bespeaks evil to come?"

"Nature's signs don't fail, master."

"Well, in defiance of your black forebodings, Congo, I shall set sail, and my return with riches will show you to be a false prophetess," and with a laugh the reckless young outlaw wended his way down toward the cabins of his people.

At one, apart from the others, he halted, and there sat a young girl and an old woman.

The latter's face was sad, her hair snow-white and she looked like one reared in refinement.

The maiden was slightly built, graceful in every movement and her dark face was very beautiful.

She held in her hands a roll of red silk, and handing it to the chief said in a low, soft voice:

"It is finished, chief."

"I thank you, Felice, for your work, and your mother and yourself have worked hard upon it, I know."

"We worked the night through, chief, and completed our task not ten minutes ago; but why do you change your flag?" said the woman.

"It is a humor I have to drop the black flag for a red one."

"Then you do not give up piracy with the giving up of the sable colors?"

"Oh, no, I but change my colors, not my career, and in fact shall come out boldly as a deep-water buccaneer."

"It is safer along the shores, with the lagoons near to retreat to."

"Doubtless, but I shall be prepared to defend myself upon the seas; but I must be off, and, Felice, when I hoist your flag I shall drink to your health and happiness."

"Happiness, chief, is not for me, I fear," was the sad reply, and then almost sharply came the words:

"Who was this maiden who lost you your vessel, Captain Lamonte?"

The face of the young pirate flushed, but he said angrily:

"Ah! some one has been a spy upon my movements."

"Oh no, I only heard the men talking last night of your having kidnapped a beautiful

girl, who was taken from you by American sailors at the sword's point, and your vessel captured as well, while you swam with a few of your men to the new craft yonder and thus saved your life."

"Yes, that is so, Felice; but don't be jealous, for that maiden was kidnapped to hold for an enormous ransom, which I knew her father would gladly pay for her restoration. Had I not failed in my plot, I would have been enriched, and then you, your mother and I could have gone far from here to dwell and given up this life."

"You pledged your word to my father, chief, who gave you the command of his people, that you would take his wife and child away from here within the year," said the maiden.

"I am aware of that, but I have not been as successful as I hoped to be; but now I have the prospect of soon gaining riches, and then I will keep my pledge; but now farewell, and watch for the raising of your flag."

With this he turned away, rapidly descended the hill, and as the *Sea Arrow* moved out across the lake, up to her peak went her new colors, a blood-red silk flag, in the center of which was an arrow of gold.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT THE MONTE CASINO.

CAPTAIN CECIL DARE decided that he would not leave Vera Cruz for a day or two at least, as by doing so he might cause suspicion in a few minds, who had witnessed the scene at the card-table the night before, that he was indeed a card sharp.

So he went on board his vessel after breakfast, leaving Clover at the hotel to be on the watch for anything that might arise which would be of value to him.

To his lieutenant, Henry Orville, he told all that had occurred, and that he would remain ashore at least one night longer.

Then he returned to the shore, and seeking his room at the hotel, found that Clover had been around to the Casino, and also seen a few of its patrons.

The news of the duel had gotten out, and as the American officer was seen unhurt upon the streets, it was said that Captain Urbana had been mortally wounded.

In those days in Mexico a duel was a legalized affair, so there was no trouble for Cecil Dare to expect from the officers of the law.

Clover had also discovered that the treacherous trio of Mexicans had breakfasted together, and that an employee in the hotel, named Juan, had gone to the quarters of Gambler Valverde, and visited him.

This looked suspicious, and the officer asked:

"Did you leave the Monte Casino last night, Clover, with no intention of returning?"

"No, sir, I did not say that I would not return to-night, though I did hope to get the chance to ship on the schooner with you, if I lost what was due me at the Casino."

"Well, how would it do for you to return to-night, and go on duty as usual?"

"I can do it, sir; but I go on at five o'clock."

"It was my hour for leaving last night when I left the Casino to see that those men did not kill you."

"Then you will go to-night?"

"Yes, sir, and it is pay night, so I'll get my money upon my arrival, and I am not overburdened with cash."

"As for that matter, my purse is at your disposal."

"Oh, thank you, sir, but if I borrow I do not earn my money, and besides, I am not broke, and will get sixty pesos to-night."

"Well, you return to duty there, and then be ready to leave at a sign from me."

"See what you can discover as to those men plotting mischief, and I will drop in about eight o'clock and may play a game or two."

"If you can find out that those men have told any stories of the duel this morning, just let me know, and when I leave the place, you follow."

"I'll do it, sir," was the cheery answer of the lad, and soon after he took his leave, and at the proper time reported for duty at the Monte Casino.

His pay was handed to him, and the manager said:

"I heard that you had entered the service

of the American captain, who was here last night, Clover?"

"I have heard a dozen stories to-day, senior, that there was no truth in," was the answer.

"Well, I am glad it is not so, for I cared not to lose you; but do you know how that duel terminated?"

"I heard that Captain Urbana was wounded, sir."

"Well, the American must be a splendid hand with the sword to better Senior Urbana."

"Do you know if he will be here to-night?"

"Captain Urbana?"

"No, the American?"

"I guess so, senior, for he is still at the hotel, for I breakfasted with him this morning, we being countrymen, you know."

"Yes, that is why it was said you had gone into his service; but he plays a bold and winning game, and I hate to see our people lose."

"He risks his money against theirs, senior, so all is fair."

"Oh, yes, it is fair enough, and I was sorry that Captain Urbana made the charge he did last night."

"I only hope there will be no trouble to-night," and the manager turned to pay off his other assistants, who began to drop in for opening time.

The Casino soon after began to fill up, for a larger crowd than usual began to flock there, urged by the many rumors floating about the streets during the day.

Senior Valverde, with his calm manner and sinister smile, dropped in early, and many gathered about him to know the result of the duel, which all felt had certainly taken place.

"I have nothing to say upon the subject, seniors," was his response, "more than to state that the duel took place and Captain Urbana was wounded."

Men wondered at this, that Urbana had at last met his match, and unable to glean more from Valverde they turned to Banker Luis Escalon, who just then entered the Casino.

But the banker was as dumb as the gambler, and would say no more than state the fact that the duel had come off, with a result unlooked for.

Then the banker sought Senior Valverde and the two sat down for a game together in a secluded alcove.

It was Clover who brought them the cards and chips, and they glanced sternly into his face, but he met their stare unabashed.

"Well, boy, you played a bold game against us this morning," said the banker, sternly.

"And I won," was the reply of the youth as he turned away, just as the hum of voices ceased suddenly throughout the *salon*.

Looking to see the cause, Valverde said, with an oath:

"The American captain has come."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOLD PLAYER.

THE coming of Cecil Dare into the Casino had hushed every voice, for his name had been upon nearly every lip.

The Mexicans were trying to solve the riddle of how Captain Almo Urbana, the invincible swordsman and dead-shot, had met his superior in other than a native of the land of the Montezumas.

As both Banker Escalon and Gambler Valverde were silent upon the subject, and seemed to resent questioning, they could only discover the matter from the standpoint of a duel having taken place and Captain Urbana having been worsted.

Those who had seen the affair of the night before, when Captain Urbana had been so readily mastered by the American and forced to retract his charge, did not so much wonder at the result.

Now into the crowded rooms came the American.

He was in full uniform, walked with his quick, yet dignified air, and though he must have heard his name upon a score of lips, seemed not conscious of the fact.

That he had come back to the Casino that night was sufficient proof that he held no fear of Captain Urbana or his friends, while he wished to more thoroughly stamp the charge against him as false.

The timid ones in the crowd glanced uneasily over to the alcove where sat Valverde, the second of the wounded Mexican officer.

The banker, Escalon, they knew had been the second of the American, and yet he did not hasten to greet him.

What did it all mean?

This question but four persons in the *salon* could answer and they gave no explanation for the gratification of the curious.

After a walk around the *salon*, and seemingly unconscious of the fact that he was the cynosure of all eyes, he turned and walked directly toward the alcove where Senor Valverde and Escalon sat, their curtains not being drawn.

Both men afterward confessed to a feeling of nervousness at his act, and yet they simply arose as he approached, though fearful that he meant to denounce them.

Bowing coldly the American said:

"Senor Valverde, I hear that you are a remarkably successful player and I would ask if you would join me in a game at your leisure?"

With a sigh of relief Valverde answered:

"With pleasure, Captain Dare, and now if it so please you, for our game has just ended."

"I would like to play five games, for what stakes you please, and then will ask Senor Escalon if he will join me in the same number?"

"Yes, senor, for whatever sum you may desire," responded the banker, but both he and the gambler were wondering what the real motive of the American was in wishing to play with them.

Giving the American his seat, Luis Escalon arose and sat near to overlook the game, while with the remark that they hoped they were not obtrusive, a number gathered around the entrance of the alcove.

"I will send for fresh cards," said the American, as Valverde took up the pack they had been playing with, and there was that in his tone which showed mistrust of the gambler, whose face flushed as he said:

"As you please, senor, but *that boy* shall not bring them," and he pointed toward Clover.

"Ah! you fear him, do you?"

"Well, let another bring them."

At this Valverde flushed still more, for he understood the innuendo of fearing Clover, as well as did Cecil Dare why the gambler would not trust Clover to bring a fresh pack.

As for the lookers-on, they were more than ever mystified.

Another messenger brought the cards, and Valverde said:

"For what sum, senor?"

"A thousand *pesos* if it please you, senor."

The gambler bowed, the cards were dealt, and the game ended with the American the winner.

The next game was like the first, and so it went on until the five had been played and with the same result.

Then Cecil Dare remarked, in a significant tone:

"I knew that I would beat you, Senor Valverde, *all things being even.*"

Senor Valverde turned pale, yet dared not resent the implied charge that he had been forced to play a fair game.

"Now, senor, you said you would oblige me," and Cecil Dare turned to Luis Escalon, who came and took Valverde's seat.

"Upon like conditions, if you please," said the American.

Escalon bowed and the cards were dealt, when Cecil Dare asked quietly, but in a voice all heard:

"May I ask how your friend, Captain Urbana, is this evening?"

The banker bit his lips, for he saw all eyes upon him, yet replied indifferently:

"Senor Valverde informs me that his friend is resting easily."

The first game ended with the American the winner, and the others were but a repetition of his remarkable luck.

As he pocketed his winnings, he said:

"I was also certain of winning from you, Senor Escalon, and it strikes me as a coincidence that my luck should hold unbroken against three such bold and successful players as Captain Urbana, Senor Valverde and yourself, and I warn you that whatever game

you may play against me in the future, *I will be the winner.*"

Both Valverde and Escalon winced under his words and steady gaze, but with a smile he bowed and turned away with a pleasant:

"*Buenas noches, senors.*"

A few moments after he had left the Casino, and the crowd were more than ever mystified.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

"Now we will be avenged, Escalon," said Senor Valverde, as he saw the American depart from the Casino.

"Then all is arranged for to-night as you planned?" whispered the banker.

"All is arranged for *now*, and to-night if the first scheme fails."

"Pray explain."

"Well, I am not a man to trust to one shaft to kill a man, and so I arranged for one to await his departure from the Casino and to strike him in the back when he reaches the dark street that turns toward the Plaza Hotel.

"He is there now, and should he fail to meet his doom, at that point, why there is another chance to-night at the hotel; but come, let us mingle with the crowd so as to be seen here, just at this time."

"You are right, for no one in Mexico is above suspicion," the banker responded, and the two arose and sauntered about the *salon*.

"Escalon," at last Valverde said suddenly.

"Yes."

"That boy is not here in the *salon* now."

"No, I do not see him."

"Let us see if we can find him, and if not, he has followed the American, and may ruin our plot."

They walked over to the manager's stand and asked for a messenger to send on an errand.

"Where is the lad Clover, senor, for I know him?" Valverde asked.

"He is somewhere about the *salon*, Senor Valverde—go and find him, Pablo."

The boy addressed departed upon his mission, while the two friends waited somewhat anxiously.

"I cannot find him in the place, senor," the young messenger reported.

The two men looked at each other and walked away, Valverde saying that he would await Clover's return to send him on his message.

"The boy has followed the officer."

"That is evident, Senor Valverde."

"Well, we can only wait, for neither of us, with all this mystery hanging about the duel this morning, would dare be away from here, where we can be seen should harm befall the stranger."

"You are right; but are you sure of your man?"

"Yes, one of the two will get him," was the reply, and the two took particular pains to make themselves visible in the Casino, so that in case of harm befalling Captain Cecil Dare on his way to the hotel, they could not in any way be connected with it.

As to the lad having gone out after the sailor, Valverde was right, for with a wave of his hand at the Casino in general, Clover left the place muttering to himself:

"Good-by, gamblers, for I am off for good."

With this he descended to the street.

All was darkness, except here and there the glimmer of a street-lamp, or a light in a window.

Hastening on, the lad saw a door open at the end of the street, and in the light he beheld two forms.

One was the American officer he knew, and the other was a cloaked form stealing after him with stealthy tread.

This much the lad saw and the door was closed, having revealed the danger the officer was in.

Lightfooted as a fawn Clover ran forward and soon came near the man following the officer.

A dim street lamp swung near and the shadower quickened his steps, and Clover saw enough to show him that he wore a *serape*, and moccasins, for he walked as stealthily as an Indian creeping upon his prey.

Just as Cecil Dare passed by the dim

street lamp, swinging across the street the shadower glided up close behind him, his hand was raised and in it shone a glittering steel.

Then came a flash and report and the intended assassin sprung into the air and fell dead upon the pavement.

"Come, senor, we must hasten away from here," and Clover seized the arm of the surprised officer, who hastily ran along with him until they turned the nearest corner, for the pistol-shot had alarmed the patrol.

"You saved me from an assassin's knife, Clover, if I mistake not," said Cecil Dare in his quiet way.

"I saw by a door opening ahead that you were shadowed, Captain Dare, so hastened on, and fired just in time," was the modest reply.

"Yes, just in time, for ten seconds more would have sent his ugly knife into my back."

"Some robber, doubtless."

"No, he was set upon your track by Valverde, I am sure, and if he had decided to have you put out of the way, just take care to sleep light to-night and take your pistol to bed with you."

"Thanks for the advice, and I will follow it; but to-morrow we leave port, for an incoming vessel reported that the Rover of the Lagoons was cruising off the Balize, and that is the man I am anxious to come up with."

"Red Rover of the Gulf, as he is called now."

"Yes."

"Well, sir, perhaps I can help you to find him," said Clover, thoughtfully.

"You?"

"Yes, sir; but here we are," and they entered the hotel, where a room was also secured for Clover, and word left that they were both to be called at dawn.

"I will tell you after we sail, sir, what I know of Captain Lamonte," said the lad, and they parted for the night.

Upon reaching his room Captain Dare at once retired, but he took the advice of the youth who had so strangely crossed his path, and placed his pistol under his pillow.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

ONE accustomed to sleep in daily and nightly danger of death, becomes trained to slumber lightly, and to awaken in a second of time, with the senses ready for thought and action.

So it was with Cecil Dare, and with the thought upon his mind that an assassin might attempt his life, he went to sleep with a feeling of unrest.

Waking after his first nap, he heard a slight sound near his window, which was wide open, though his door was closed and bolted.

The window was thirty feet from the ground, and yet one might come up to it by means of a ladder.

He saw the stars without, and suddenly they were obscured and the dark outline of a human form appeared in the window.

No sound was made by the midnight visitor, who stepped into the room and gazed about him.

Captain Dare had made but one move and that was noiseless almost, save a slight clicking sound.

For full a minute the visitor stood gazing about him in the indistinct light and then he seemed to have taken in the situation for he moved noiselessly toward the bed.

He was a large man, and his right hand was uplifted and held in its grasp a knife.

This much the officer surmised, for he could only see the form and uplifted hand.

Nearer and nearer crept the assassin until he stood within three feet of the bed and was ready for his red work.

But a cry burst from his lips as his eyes saw a white arm raised and he attempted to spring upon his intended victim.

But a flash, a blinding glare in his eyes and with the report of a pistol ringing in the room he sunk to the floor.

The hotel was alarmed, and men hastened to the officer's room, among them being Clover.

They found the officer with a candle in his hand, which he had just lighted, bending over the form of a man upon the floor.

"He came in through the window, senior, and sought to assassinate me, but I fired ere he could use his knife. That is all there is about it," said Dare to the landlord, who quickly gazed into the face of the dead man and started back with the cry:

"It is Juan! my second clerk!"

"He lowered himself from the roof to the window with this lariat," said Clover.

"I am glad, indeed, senior, that you came to no harm, and he deserved his fate," the landlord said, yet half-dazed by the knowledge that his trusted clerk had proven an assassin.

The body was removed, and leisurely dressing himself, for it was near dawn, Cecil Dare went to the office, paid his bill and with Clover strolled down toward the shore.

There, just at dawn a boat was secured and they rowed out to the schooner-of-war, which almost immediately got up anchor and standing out past gloomy San Juan De Uloa, was soon breasting the blue waters of the Gulf.

"Lieutenant Orville, let me present to you my new-found friend, Master Clover, for I know him by no other name.

"Twice has he saved my life since I have been ashore, and he is to have the berth aboard as my secretary, until he chooses to go higher," said Captain Dare, as Lieutenant Orville came on deck.

The lieutenant cordially greeted the handsome lad, and the other officers, having already heard of his rescue at the duel, through the men, who loudly sung his praises, complimented him in a manner that made him feel welcome at once, especially when the captain related the two other attempts upon his life.

But, as the mysterious youth, confessing himself an American, saw fit to explain nothing more about himself, he became at once an object of curiosity on account of the mystery hanging over him.

Their captain had addressed him simply as Clover. If he knew of any other name he did not mention it, so that, as "Clover," the youth was entered upon the schooner's book, with the words:

"Captain's clerk."

As there was an empty state-room in the cabin, it was assigned to Clover, by the captain's orders, and all saw that the young stranger aboard ship was to be treated as an honored guest, for the steward was ordered to place a seat for him at the commander's table, which caused one of the middies to remark:

"My name it is Clover, and I live in clover."

With the information gleaned at Vera Cruz regarding the Red Rover of the Gulf, as Lamonte was now called by seamen, Captain Dare headed at once for the Balize, hoping to find him somewhere off the Delta.

That night, after supper, as Dare stood on the quarter-deck alone, Clover joined him and entered into conversation, which at last led the captain to say:

"By the way, Clover, you said when in Vera Cruz, you might give me some information regarding this Red Rover of the Gulf."

"Yes, sir, of Lamonte."

"Such is his name."

The lad was silent, as though lost in deep thought, and as he showed no inclination to speak, Cecil Dare again asked:

"What do you know of this pirate, Clover?"

"A great deal, sir."

"Indeed! Have you ever seen him?"

"Often, sir."

"When?"

"I saw him last about eight months ago."

"Where?"

"On board of his *goleta*, Captain Dare."

"Ah! you have been on board his vessel, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"As a prisoner?"

"No, sir."

"What else could you have been on that pirate craft, Clover, other than a prisoner?"

"Pirate, sir," was the startling response of the lad.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SENIOR ESCALON'S CONDITIONS.

THE morning's dawn in Vera Cruz brought considerable excitement to its people, for a

dead peon had been found in the street, not far from the Monte Casino, and a clerk of the Plaza Hotel had attempted to assassinate a stranger guest in his room.

That guest, the commander of an American sloop which had been lying at anchor in the port of the town for several days, had also been engaged in a duel with Captain Almo Urbana, while he had won large sums as well from the Mexican officer, Banker Escalon, and even Valverde the gambler.

At dawn after his attempted assassination he had set sail on his schooner, having simply left for the *alcalde* his written statement of the assassination.

Of course these stories were enlarged at every repetition, and when Valverde and Banker Escalon went to dine with the wounded Captain Almo Urbana, the rumors floating about had caused a vast deal of excitement.

Very much fatigued by all they had passed through, both Senior Valverde and Banker Escalon had slept late and then had breakfast together.

Then they learned that both of their hirelings had met with the fate they had intended for their victim.

"I cannot understand it," said Valverde, for Potosi the peon was as cunning as a fox, as noiseless in his movements as a snake and as fierce as a wolf."

"The boy followed him, as he did the American, and gave the alarm to his friend," Banker Escalon said.

"I believe you have hit the right explanation, Escalon," said Valverde, excitedly.

"How else could your man have been killed?"

"True, that solves the mystery; but then Juan also met his death at the hands of the American."

"Yes, and at the hands of a most extraordinary man."

"I confess it; but what is to be done now?"

"The American has gone?"

"Yes, his vessel sailed soon after sunrise, they say."

"Well, I see nothing to be done, and admit we are worsted badly."

"Yes, and three of us against one, a stranger in the land, and victor over us at our own game."

The two men seemed to by no means enjoy the retrospection, and while bemoaning their ill fortune, a note came from Captain Urbana asking them to dine with him that day, and to come early.

They obeyed the summons, and found the captain in a very warm humor.

He was in possession of the facts, as they knew them, and after he had heard all that they had to tell, he added:

"But I have a chance to avenge myself, senior."

Both were anxious to know how, and he opened an official document, just received from the City of Mexico, and which he read to them, the contents being to the effect that the Government had decided, as he, Captain Almo Urbana of the army, was a man of great wealth, and desired to exchange from the service ashore to service afloat, he would be appointed a captain in the navy of Mexico, if he cared to go to the expense of purchasing a vessel-of-war just built and ready for sea.

This vessel the Government, in a fit of economy, could not afford to purchase, so left it for him to do so, if he cared enough for service afloat to expend the money for his ship, and he would be ordered upon special service to hunt down the lawless rovers of the sea.

"Now, seniors, you see my chance, do you not, to avenge myself?" said Captain Urbana, excitedly.

"I don't exactly see how you mean," dryly responded Banker Escalon.

"Why, with a good ship under me I can sink the fellow and all his crew."

"But your orders are to go pirate-hunting."

"Bah! can I not mistake him for a pirate?"

"Ah, yes, you might; but about this vessel you have to purchase?" the gambler said.

At this Urbana glanced helplessly toward Banker Escalon.

The latter said nothing and did not even seem to see his look.

As Urbana did not reply, Senior Valverde asked:

"Does your paper give the amount of purchase money to get the vessel?"

"Yes, ninety thousand *pesos* cash, and she is completely fitted out, guns, small-arms and all, while she is said to be a remarkably fleet craft."

"What is her rig?"

"A brig, and she is three hundred tons burden," said Captain Urbana, glancing at his official papers.

"You are said to be a rich man, Captain Urbana, but the sum you need to buy the vessel is a fortune in itself."

"I am aware that it is a large sum, Senior Valverde, but I hoped to have some aid in the purchase of the vessel," and Captain Urbana again looked appealingly toward Banker Escalon, who now said:

"Well, you might get aid, *upon conditions*, and perhaps you and I, Valverde, might be willing to take shares in the brig."

"Yes, if you deem the venture a good one and are willing to take a third, I will do as much," said Valverde.

"I will take two-thirds, Valverde, and you the other."

"And Captain Urbana?" asked Valverde, with surprise.

"Well, the captain's fortune is just now so tied up he cannot get hold of the money, so he will put in his services against our gold, but, as I said before, *upon conditions*."

"Name your conditions, Escalon, for I see that you have some plan in that busy brain of yours," said Urbana.

"How much of a share does the Government claim of your prizes, may I ask?"

"One-half."

"And the balance is to pay expenses and be divided between you and your crew?"

"Yes."

"Then you get the honor only?"

"About that."

"Then my conditions are that you take your vessel, as though you purchased her yourself, ship a crew to suit yourself, then marry the Senorita Ravera, if you can, and failing in this to turn your craft into a free rover and fight for a fortune under the black flag," was the startling conditions offered by the Banker Escalon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE NET.

If Captain Urbana was not startled at the bold conditions demanded by Banker Escalon, his face belied him, for he turned very pale, and seemed like one struck dumb by what he heard.

Banker Escalon laughed, while Senior Valverde joined in, as though he enjoyed the situation, also, immensely.

"Then it is a joke?" at last said Captain Urbana, with a faint smile, as though he too began to see the fun in the proposition of Escalon.

"Joke? Well, it is nothing of the kind," returned Banker Escalon, and he added:

"As I will soon convince you, my dear Captain Urbana."

"I wish you would let me understand what you are driving at," angrily said the soldier.

"It is your due, and I will; but, remember, I am telling a great secret, and one which Valverde and I alone know."

"You listen to it in confidence only; you will pledge yourself?"

"I will."

"Well, let me tell you that though our friend here is known only as Senior Henrico Valverde, he is living a dual life, as I am, you are, and many more of us, supposed to be saints."

"Now you know something of Senior Valverde's life, and that after leaving the priesthood he disappeared for some years, but reappeared with a fortune which he said he had dug from the mountain mines."

"I have so understood."

"Now the mines he worked were the mountain trails leading to and from the mines, and he made considerable money thereby."

"You would infer that he was a road-bandit?"

"Of course, what else?"

"You have heard of Henrico, the High wayman?"

"Who has not, and he on one occasion

halted me and took all I had, some three hundred pesos, but, strange to say, some years ago I received the sum back again with a note from Henrico saying that he regretted the robbery and begged to return me what he had borrowed."

"Yes, I concluded to give you back your money, Captain Urbana, after I had the pleasure of meeting you here socially."

"What! you, Valverde?"

"Yes, senor."

"You do not mean—"

"I only mean that I am Henrico, the Highwayman," came the rejoinder.

Almo Urbana was fairly shocked, and again Banker Escalon laughed, and the self-confessed robber joined in the merriment.

"Well, you certainly mystify me, senors?"

"Let me explain, senor, that Henrico Valverde and myself were boys together, and we were in several scrapes then that would not bear confessing, and thus we were bound together."

"When I went into the banking business, Valverde called one night, told me who he was and asked me to dispose of the booty he got in his robberies."

"I was struck favorably with the idea, accepted his terms and we have made a great deal of money together in our partnership."

"Then Senor Valverde decided to come here to live, playing the role of gentleman gambler, and you may have noticed that he often makes trips away for a week or so?"

"I have."

"Then it is that he visits his band, while he has here in the town several spies, two of whom have been wiped out by your American friend."

"Now, senor, my plan is, and Valverde agrees to it, that you go into partnership with us."

"We will buy you the vessel and you take command and go on a cruise where you will."

"But one-half of your plunder and prize money, goes to Valverde and myself, and the other half will pay expenses, yourself and men, and your share will be a liberal one."

"Run out as a Mexican brig of course, but then hoist your free flag and let the world know you are afloat."

"Your first plan will be to sail for the hacienda harborage of Don Ramon Ravera."

"What you tell him incidentally, of happening in Vera Cruz, must forever destroy all hope which the American captain can have of making her his wife."

"That I leave to you, and it will be well to profess sincere friendship and all that for the American, and regret at his behavior, which will be whatever you please to make it."

"Then find out what your prospects are to marry the beautiful Rachel, and if they are good then stick to the legitimate service until she is your wife, when you will have enough, after we get our share to live upon, and we will only take one-half."

"But the Don?"

"Ah, neither Senor Valverde or myself take a man's life into consideration, and, of course, he will not live long and his daughter will inherit all."

"If I cannot win the lady to marry me?"

"Then hoist your black flag and go to work like a good buccaneer."

"If I refuse to become an outlaw at your will?"

"Well, I'll simply have to sell you out for what debts you owe me, and I have sundry bits of paper, my dear captain, which bear names you executed, which will—"

"Stop! I will accept your conditions," was the stern reply of the officer who was now driven to the wall.

"You are sure, senor?" dryly said Valverde.

"I think so," returned Banker Escalon.

"When will you give me the money to buy this vessel?"

"We will buy the vessel for you," was the cautious reply of Valverde.

"Yes, and you can accept the Government's offer at once, and we will have the money ready within ten days, for that American got five thousand cash out of us last night, and as much more from you which I advanced, and all because he would not play with our cards."

"He was wise," sneered Captain Urbana.

"Yes, and we dared not open our lips for fear he would refer to the duel," but let me tell you that your first cruise must be to the hacienda harbor, where you can become the guest of Don Ramon for a week or more."

"I understand," said Captain Urbana moodily.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A COMMISSIONED PIRATE.

CAPTAIN ALMO URBANA did not place himself wholly in the toils of Banker Escalon without a bonus for himself.

He examined into his affairs and discovered that if he was sold out he would have, after all debts were paid, some five thousand pesos in cash.

This he showed to Banker Escalon and demanded that sum, and that a few outstanding debts should be paid besides.

His terms were agreed to after some hesitation.

Since receiving his wound, the Mexican officer had not gone to the club of the soldiers, nor in public anywhere.

He did not appear at the Casino, and simply went about his duties of getting his vessel ready for sea by a given time.

One day he met a rival officer, the only man who had not been afraid to try his skill with him with a sword or pistol.

They had never liked each other, and observing the disfigured face of his rival, Major Felipe had said with a rude laugh:

"Ah, Urbana, glad to see you, for since your duel with that American who wounded you, you have kept very close; but I don't wonder, for he certainly has marked you for life, and you are no longer the handsome Apollo you were."

Quickly shot out the Mexican captain's right hand from the shoulder, and Major Felipe of the artillery was knocked down.

The next day Captain Urbana went about his duties as usual, while the town was ringing with the story of his desperate duel with Major Felipe, whom he had run through the heart after half an hour's combat.

"The Lion was not wholly tamed by the American," was the remark of one of Major Felipe's regiment, and again people began to feel that Almo Urbana was not to be trifled with, and he became as much feared as before his duel with Cecil Dare.

At last the brig was ready for sea, but, to the great disappointment of the people, her commander slipped away in the night, and only Senors Escalon and Valverde could have told of the parting supper in the cabin when toast after toast was drank to the successful cruise of the "Relentless."

Upon his deck stood Almo Urbana, looking astern at the lights disappearing in the dim distance, and with his thoughts busy.

He remembered how his career had opened brilliantly for him in his youthful years, and yet he had cast aside all for a wild life of dissipation and gaming.

He saw it all now, how two fortunes had been squandered, and that had he not gotten the opening to go to sea in command of the brig, he would have had to fly to save himself from prison.

Luis Escalon the banker, alone stood between him and a convict's garb, and he was his friend only to use him.

Had Escalon died suddenly, then flight alone would have saved the Mexican officer.

The world believed Urbana rich, and yet Escalon had all of his wealth, for value received, and this secret the two held between them until Valverde had been taken into the partnership.

Still Urbana did not doubt but that Escalon had secretly protected himself at his expense.

So the time had come at last when he must make a venture, like a last effort to save a sinking ship.

The world believed him honored by the command of the brig, and the Government had honored him, only on conditions, which caused him to purchase the vessel himself.

The *junta* believed that he had purchased it from his own means, but he knew that he was but a tool, the slave of Escalon.

It had been a surprise to him to know that Valverde was the famous robber chief Henrico, and that Escalon was the receiver of his stolen goods; but he was in their secret now, as they held his.

He would doubtless develop into a sea outlaw, with Escalon the disposer of his plunder.

The three had been mixed up in the treachery toward the American officer, and been worsted, while he had a glaring scar across his face which disfigured him for life, destroying the handsome face he had been so proud of.

This embittered him and made him revengeful, and woe be unto Cecil Dare should the Relentless cross the path of the American schooner-of-war Sea Soldier.

But the Mexican outlaw was determined to make a last desperate struggle not to go down in the whirlpool of crime, and it would bring him a sweet revenge, too, and that was to marry Rachel Ravera.

Could he win her, with her vast fortune, he could pay off his obligations to Escalon, silence Valverde, and owning the brig himself, he could go up the ladder of rank and fame unaided, while, for her sake he would cast the evil past behind him.

And this, too, would bring the revenge he sought against Cecil Dare, by robbing him of his bride.

Such was the plan of the newly commissioned naval officer.

But if all failed, then he would, if he had to turn pirate, have his revenge upon Escalon as well, for he would turn his vessel into a lawless cruiser, giving no account to any one, and living for himself alone, while, if refused by Rachel Ravera he would boldly kidnap her and force her to become his wife.

With this plan in his mind this commissioned pirate laid his course for Hacienda Harbor, where he was sure of a cordial welcome from Don Ramon, who had always been his friend.

CHAPTER XXX.

CAPTAIN URBANA ARRIVES AT HACIENDA HARBOR.

"FATHER, what a beautiful vessel," cried Rachel Ravera, as she sat upon the broad piazza of the hacienda one pleasant afternoon, engaged in reading, while her father lazily dozed in a hammock.

At her words he arose and gazing seaward a moment then turned and took down a glass which he turned upon a vessel a league or more away, out upon the blue waters of the Gulf.

"She is a beautiful vessel, a brig, and if she goes about in a few minutes she will be heading for the harbor, Rachel," said the Don.

"I hope it is Captain Dare," said Rachel, joyfully.

"You forget, my child, that his vessel is a schooner, and yonder craft a brig—there! she goes about and heads for the harbor."

"It cannot be a pirate, father," and the face of the maiden paled.

"I see that the guard is giving the alarm, so that we will be ready for him if he is a buccaneer, Rachel."

"There goes her flag, father!"

"Yes, and it is the eagle and the serpent—our own flag, but I know of no such vessel in our navy."

"Perhaps the Mexican flag may be a blind, father, and she be after all a lawless cruiser?"

"Well, she will find herself in hot quarters if she ventures in here, my child, and now I see the wisdom of Captain Dare's urging my fortifying the pass, for we were wholly unprotected before."

"See! there go the men to the guns," and as the Don spoke, around the hacienda wall dashed two-score mounted men at a run.

They rode rapidly to a point behind the little fort, where their horses were corraled, and as they sprung to their guns, having heard the tocsin of alarm sounded by the sentinel on the lookout, another force came at a double quick from the hacienda, led by the manager of the estate.

"You see our men are well trained, Rachel, and sixty good fellows in those works could beat off a frigate, even if commanded by your hero, Captain Dare," and the Don smiled mischievously.

"I doubt it, father; in fact, I believe Captain Dare could run in with his schooner and silence our fort," returned Rachel, and her words proved her confidence in her lover.

The brig meanwhile had stood into the

pass, and as a shot was fired over her, she rounded to.

"What in Satan's name does that mean?"

"The Don has an armed fort here," cried Captain Urbana, who stood on the deck gazing through the pass at the hacienda.

He knew the approach well, having several times visited the hacienda by water, and once camped with his command a few leagues in the rear of Don Ramon's home for over a month.

"You know, now, that the Senorita Ravera was kidnapped half a year ago and the Don has doubtless garrisoned a fort since then for protection," said an officer of the brig.

"That is doubtless it, Senor Pasquale, so lower a boat and send it under flag of truce to report the Mexican brig-of-war Relentless, Captain Almo Urbana, who desires to pay his compliments to Don Ramon."

The officer gave the necessary orders, and the boat went into the pass, landing at the fort, whither Don Ramon had already gone.

The boat soon returned with Don Ramon's compliments and an invitation for Captain Urbana and his officers to make the hacienda their home.

The brig at once got under way again, and as she swept in by the little fort, dipped her flag and fired a salute, after which she ran in to a harborage and dropped anchor.

As Captain Urbana stepped on the little wharf he was met by Don Ramon, who started visibly at the hideous red scar adown his cheek, for he had heard nothing of the duel between the Mexican and the American officer.

Captain Urbana's face colored at the look, and he said, bitterly:

"I am slightly disfigured, Don Ramon, since last we met; but I will explain at another time, so now permit me to say how I appreciate your kind welcome."

The Don returned some pleasant rejoinder, and led the way to the hacienda, where the guest was greeted by Rachel, who also noted the ugly scar with unfeigned surprise, and this Urbana also observed, and said in the same bitter tone, which he tried to hide under gallantry:

"My face is disfigured, Senorita Rachel, but my heart is the same, always the same."

"Permit me to congratulate you, senor, upon your change of service, and promotion to the command of so beautiful a vessel," said Rachel Ravera, wishing to change the subject from the cruel scar upon the face of the officer.

"She is a beautiful craft, senorita, and I shall have the pleasure of showing yourself and the Don all over her, and having you test my *cuisine*, also, for you must dine with me to-morrow."

"And remember, Captain Urbana, you and your officers are our guests so long as you please to honor us with your company."

"Thank you, Don; but my officers will be busy for the rest of the day, getting the ship in trim after her cruise, but they will enjoy your hospitalities at a later day, for I shall hardly care to sail from such a delightful retreat within a week."

"And then, Captain Urbana, where will you cruise?"

"My mission is a special one, Don Ramon, for I go out as a pirate-hunter."

"Yes, and the United States Government has sent Captain Cecil Dare upon the same special service, and he has been most successful in his mission," said Rachel.

"So I have heard," significantly responded Almo Urbana, and he saw the blush that mantled the cheeks of the maiden at his words, and smiled wickedly as cruel thoughts flashed through his mind.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CAPTAIN "SPINS A YARN."

BOTH Don Ramon and the Senorita Rachel were curious about the red scar down the face of the Mexican captain.

Those were not the days of steam and telegraph, of newspaper enterprise, and living afar as they did from the cities, tidings of what was going on in the outside world came to them slowly.

With an extensive library, a luxurious home, music, boating, sailing and a stable full of horses, there was plenty of enjoyment, while within a radius of thirty miles dwelt a

number of rancheros and their families who often visited at the hacienda of the Don, being always sure of a most cordial welcome; but what was going on in the outside world was not heard until months after its occurrence, unless a special craft was sent to Vera Cruz for stores and thus brought back the news.

So the Don was anxious to know all that had been going on and was delighted at the coming of the Mexican brig into his harbor.

He had always liked Captain Urbana, for that cunning officer had never shown any but the bright side of his character to the Don.

In fact the Don had thought of him as a possible husband for his daughter, until the rescue of her by Cecil Dare had soon shown him that Rachel's heart was interested for life in the handsome and daring young American.

Having himself wedded an American lady, he did not hold the prejudice of his countrymen against foreigners.

After coming from his room, Captain Urbana joined his host and hostess in the spacious library.

He spoke of matters in general, and then, as though he was not aware of the fact of Rachel having been kidnapped by the Rover of the Lagoon and rescued by Cecil Dare, he began by saying that he had been involved in a very unfortunate affair with a foreigner at the Monte Casino.

As all Mexican gentlemen gambled, nothing was thought of the fact that he was not an exception to the rule, and so both the father and daughter listened with interest to his story, as, depending upon his imagination and discarding facts, he told it to suit his own purpose.

"The truth is," he went on, "I felt sorry for the stranger, as he seemed to be wholly unknown, and Banker Luis Escalon, whom you doubtless know, Don Ramon, was my partner."

"Yes, I know Senor Escalon, and bank with him."

"He is a fine fellow," said the Don.

"Valverde you may also know?"

"Yes, yet I have never cared to cultivate him."

"Many do not like Henrico Valverde, but he is a royally good fellow, and we three were together when I asked the stranger to join us in a game."

"He did so, naming a large sum to play for, and desiring that only two of us should play."

"He won from the first game, and as I lost all I cared to risk, for I have a limit, never going beyond my income, I thought I detected him doubling cards upon me, and so accused him, and both Escalon and Valverde sustained me in the charge."

"The result was he gave me a blow, and of course a challenge and duel followed."

"He insisted upon a certain point upon the shore as the place of meeting, and at sunrise the next morning."

"I went, intending to disarm him, give him his life, and demand that he leave Vera Cruz, for you know my prowess as a swordsman, Don Ramon?"

"Yes, I have yet to hear of your meeting your equal, Captain Urbana."

"Well, senor, we crossed blades, Senor Escalon acting as his second, Valverde as mine, when suddenly there appeared upon the scene, led by a lad who has been employed at the Casino, a party of seamen who at once attacked us."

"I received this cut that you see, from my adversary's sword, when I became negligent in my surprise at the coming of the seamen, and finding that they were there to protect their commander and wage war against Escalon, Valverde and myself, we retreated from the field."

"The boy, it seems, was in the pay of the card-sharps who frequent the Monte Casino, and it is said that he, by signs, and double cards, aided certain men for a consideration, and he certainly led those seamen against my friends and myself on the dueling-ground."

"I returned to my quarters, and that night Valverde and Escalon again attended the Casino, where the stranger put in an appearance and boldly asked them to play."

"They consented, hoping to catch him at cheating; but this they were unable to do,

though he won a large sum from each, and they had not a game to their credit.

"The boy was also there, I may add, and left the Casino with the stranger."

"The next day I learned of a murder being committed near the Casino, and this stranger was suspected, while that night in his hotel the clerk, Senor Juan, was killed in this man's room."

"It was said that Juan had descended from the roof, through a window, to rob the stranger, but many believe that he was invited into the room to play, and detecting the stranger's character, was killed by him, and the lariat afterward put down from the roof to help out the story of his going there for robbery."

"That morning at dawn the stranger sailed, and I had plenty to do in fitting out my vessel, having been ordered upon sea duty, and tell you my story now only to explain about this terrible wound."

"And who was the stranger, Captain Urbana?"

"An American naval officer, Don Ramon, by the name of Cecil Dare," was the innocently-uttered reply, and which brought from Senorita Rachel the ringing words:

"It is false! utterly false!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

THE ringing words of Rachel Ravera fairly startled Captain Urbana.

He had expected, when he mentioned the name of the man, against whom he had concocted so bold a tale, that he would be met at first by a denial, which, however, he was well prepared to offset by certain proofs from certain officers on board his vessel who had been made to see the affair in the light of their commander's eyes.

That Rachel should speak as she did showed to Almo Urbana that her love for the American captain was not to be easily shaken off.

"My dear Senorita Ravera, in what way have I offended you that you claim my story to be a falsehood?" he asked in an injured tone, as though he could not comprehend his having done or said aught that was wrong.

"You accuse Captain Cecil Dare, senor, with being a card-sharp, and a man who called upon his seamen to protect him in a duel with you, while further you lay the charge of a double murder against him!" said Rachel excitedly, and vainly striving to be calm.

"I did accuse an officer of the American navy, who registered himself as Cecil Dare, of what you say, Senorita Ravera, and I believe all that I say against him, while I really consider him to be a fraud, that he is not a naval officer of the United States, but a pirate, playing the daring part as the commander of a cruiser, and as such boldly put into Vera Cruz."

"My dear Urbana, this is a fearful, a terrible accusation," cried the Don.

"It is utterly and unqualifiedly false, for Captain Cecil Dare is a man of honor, a gentleman and a commander in the navy of the United States, and as such he could be guilty of no mean or wrong action," warmly said Rachel.

"You know him then, Senorita Ravera?" asked the Mexican officer.

"Know him? Why I owe to him more than life, for at the risk of his life he saved me from Lamonte the Sea Rover who had kidnapped me, and I am to-day pledged to become his wife."

"My God! but, senorita, can we be thinking of the same man?"

"I refer, senor, to Captain Cecil Dare, commander of the American schooner-of-war Sea Soldier."

"And such was the name of the man, and of his vessel, to whom I refer; but may not some one else have imposed upon me, and in fact a pirate have taken his name to run into Vera Cruz?"

"That may be, senor," said Rachel.

"Pray describe the man, senor," said Don Ramon.

This Captain Urbana did most faithfully, and both Don Ramon and Rachel said that his description was the counterpart of what that of Captain Dare would be, while the maiden added:

"Yes, and there cannot be two such men, and more, that one, Cecil Dare, cannot be

guilty of the vile charges against him which you make, and *he is not*."

"My child! be not so severe upon Captain Urbana, our life-long friend, in your defense of the American officer, who, after all, is but a stranger to us," said the Don reprovingly.

"Father, are you turning against one to whom you are so deeply indebted?" sternly said Rachel.

"No, but I have no reason to doubt Captain Urbana's statement, and he has no cause to accuse Dare wrongfully.

"We met him under circumstances when he nobly served us, and wounded in our defense, he came here and remained for some weeks.

"Again he came to us, and we found him all that we could desire in a noble friend, and he departed with you pledged to become his wife.

"Now comes Captain Urbana, knowing nothing even of our acquaintance with this American stranger, and shows a scar that will last him to his grave, while he tells us of this man, calling himself Cecil Dare, who has swindled not only himself but two other gentlemen at cards, brought to the field of honor his seamen to protect him, and been involved in two death-scenes which point strongly to him as the guilty man.

"I must say, my child, that there is a possibility that we have been deceived in this man, and until we are convinced that we wrong him, we should believe the statement of one whom we know to be above suspicion."

Rachel was evidently impressed by her father's reasoning, and replied:

"I do not charge Captain Urbana with misrepresentation, father, nor do I so wish him to understand; but I do say that the one whom he has met is *not* Cecil Dare."

"I did not believe, Senorita Ravera, that you would intentionally accuse me of falsely speaking against any man; but I told you the facts as I know them, and it is now for us to discover if *your* friend, Captain Dare, and the man I know by that name, and to my bitter cost, as you see, is one and the same.

"From what you say, there must be some mistake, and I hope, for your sake, that there is, so let us quietly look the whole affair in the face and see if we cannot find a straw of hope for you that some one has impersonated the gallant American officer whom you know."

His manner was so kindly that Rachel felt sorry that she had been so severe toward him, and said:

"You told us that some of your officers met the man who called himself Cecil Dare?"

"Yes, senorita, Lieutenant Rafael Sanchez met him at the Casino the night of our play, and a junior officer by the name of Michaelis, saw him at the hotel the night of Clerk Juan's murder, and signed the paper clearing him from censure in killing a man who had entered his room to rob him."

"Will you not send for those two officers, Captain Urbana, and have them dine with us?" said Don Ramon.

"With pleasure, Don Ramon, I will write them a line if you will send it by a messenger."

Paper and quill were given him and a note was hastily written as follows:

"You are invited, Senor Sanchez, in company with Officer Michaelis, to dine to-day with Don Ramon and daughter, who appear to doubt the story I told you about the American Cecil Dare.

"It will be to your interest to state facts as I gave them to you, and not as from merely hearsay.

"URBANA."

This note was dispatched aboard the brig, it being yet an hour before the dinner hour, and then Captain Urbana said:

"Can you not in some way aid us, senorita, you and the Don, in discovering if the gentleman whom you defend, and the man whom I denounce, are one and the same?"

"I have a miniature likeness of Captain Dare, Senor Captain, which he had painted for me in Havana, and brought me upon his last visit."

"Is it a fair likeness?"

"It is a perfect one."

"Then we will see if either Sanchez or Michaelis recognize it."

"And yourself?"

"Yes, but is there anything about his vessel you would know, if I spoke of a certain marked peculiarity?"

"Yes, what was her figure-head?"

"A soldier with drawn sword in an attitude of leading a charge."

"Yes, yes, the schooner had such a figure-head, Captain Urbana," and Rachel's eyes dimmed with tears, for a net seemed to be encircling her lover from which there appeared to be no escape for him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TRUE AS STEEL.

"THERE is a peculiarity in the rig of Captain Dare's schooner, Captain Urbana, which I noticed particularly," said Don Ramon, evidently distressed at the seeming proof of Cecil Dare's guilt, yet looking upon Almo Urbana as one who would rescue his daughter from a fate equally as terrible as that from which the American had.

"I recall, senor, that she was a square-sail schooner, and though her masts were very tall, her topmasts were particularly so, and she carried a long spar hauled to an upright alongside the foremast that seemed to indicate that she could hoist a lateen sail aloft when going before the wind."

"That is his vessel, Captain Urbana, for we sailed with him several times, and greatly enjoyed the beauty and speed of his schooner."

"It was fitted up with extravagant luxury too, we thought."

I did not go on board, senor, but merely rowed around her at her anchorage, and none of her officers and men came ashore, except her captain, and those who were on hand to interfere in the duel."

"That was strange."

"Yes, Don Ramon, it was indeed, and as all courtesies from our own fort officers were refused, and none offered by the American, her short stay in Vera Cruz made anything but a good impression there, I assure you."

Rachel now arose and left the room, her heart too full for utterance, and after her departure the Don was constrained to admit that he believed that they had been imposed upon by a pirate.

When the two officers arrived from the brig, Rachel's peon maid Irma, came into the room with a small velvet case which she handed to Don Ramon with the remark that the senorita desired to be excused, as she was indisposed, but sent the miniature for the Mexican officers to see.

Then Irma left the room, but stopped just outside the door to learn what was said.

The Don greeted the officers cordially, and then explained the situation, appealing first to Lieutenant Rafael Sanchez, by saying:

"You saw this alleged American officer at the Monte Casino, I believe, Lieutenant Sanchez?"

"Yes, Don Ramon, and I was struck by his very grand appearance, and the cool manner in which he played cards."

"Did you see him elsewhere, may I ask?"

"No, senor."

"And where did you see Captain Dare, Officer Michaelis?"

"At the Plaza Hotel, senor, on the night when Clerk Juan attempted to murder him."

"You really believe that Juan did make the attempt to murder and rob him?"

"If the lariat hanging from the roof over the open window was an indication, and Juan being found in his room, with a knife, then there could be no doubt; but there was a whisper about after the American had gone on board his vessel, that Juan had in his possession a large sum of money and went to the stranger's room to play cards with him, while the knot with which the lariat was tied about the flag-staff was what was known as a sailor's knot, while Juan was a landsman.

"Then, too, the boy who was at the Casino was said to be an ally of the stranger, and he certainly sailed in the schooner with him."

"And the man who was killed near the Casino, who was he?" asked the Don, nervously.

"A half-breed messenger from the mountains, who brought gold to Valverde from his mines, but his leather kit was found to be empty when the body was discovered, Captain Urbana remarked:

"Well, senors, I have something here to show you, and if you will, one at a time, step

into the next room as I call you, it will be a favor to me," and the Don went into an adjoining room and quickly called to Captain Urbana.

"Who is this, Captain Urbana?" and he took from his pocket the velvet case inclosing the miniature.

"It is the American, Senor Don, who gave me the wound.

"I would know him among a hundred."

"And now for Lieutenant Sanchez," said the Don, calling upon that officer.

"May I ask if you have ever seen this face before, Lieutenant Sanchez?"

"Yes, sir, it is the American whom I saw at the Monte Casino, and a perfect likeness it is of him, too," was the prompt response.

"Thank you," and the Don's voice quivered.

Officer Michaelis was then called and shown the miniature.

"Do you recognize this likeness, senor, as one of myself, taken years ago?"

"No, Don Ramon, it is the American officer whom I saw at the Plaza Hotel in Vera Cruz two months ago."

"Gentlemen, I thank you," and the Don led the way in to dinner after casting the velvet-incased miniature out of the open window into the flower garden.

He appeared to be a very genial host, but all could see that he suffered for his daughter, and soon after dinner the officers retired to the vessel, promising to call upon the morrow.

Then the Don ascended to his daughter's room, where Irma had already made her report of what she had overheard, and brought back the miniature which she had seen thrown out of the window by the Don.

And Irma had added:

"Don't believe it all, senorita, until you *know he is false*."

When the Don entered he found his daughter by the open window, and taking a seat near her he said sadly as he took her hand in his:

"My child, the proof is too damning, and this man Cecil Dare is a pirate."

"Father, until he tells me so himself I will not believe it," was the firm response of the beautiful girl and a voice from the next room where Irma had retreated, firmly uttered the word:

"Bueno!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CLOVER SPINS A YARN.

THE assertion of the lad, Clover, to Captain Dare, that he had been a pirate, completely nonplused that officer for a minute, or more.

He had suspected the lad as having been a wild fellow who had run away from home to become a sailor, and who was accordingly meeting with the rough experience of many a boy who had done likewise but when he coolly told him that he had been a *pirate*, the captain was nonplused.

Still Cecil Dare was not the man to turn his back upon one who had served him so well, and he said after awhile:

"Come, Clover, you do not mean that you were a *bona fide* buccaneer?"

"Yes, sir, I was a pirate, for I was one of the crew of the Rover of the Lagoons," was the firm response.

"Tell me how it came about, my lad?" kindly said Cecil Dare.

The lad was silent for some minutes and at last said:

"Captain Dare, I am a boy who can keep my own counsel, and I do not betray myself, or a friend; but I will tell you just what made me a pirate.

"You see, sir, my mother was left a widow, with several children to support, for my father was a sea-captain, out of Boston, and he went down in his vessel, and we never again heard of him.

"The one who settled up the estate for my mother brought her in nothing, but asked her to marry him, and, to educate her children she did so, for he was a very rich widower, with one child, a son of twenty-one.

"This son, our step-brother, made life wretched for my mother, my sisters and myself, and many a time have I been black and blue from his kicks.

"Our step-father treated us no better, and I vowed, little boy of eight that I was, that

I would run away and go to sea, make money and take my mother and sisters to live with me some day.

"My step-brother one day got into some trouble which caused him to fly to keep out of prison, for he forged the name of a rich gentleman to whose daughter he was engaged.

"He was arrested by a constable, but killed the officer, and again made his escape, and several years after I heard my step-father tell my mother that there had been an American pirate hanged by a Spanish vessel-of-war at some port in the West Indies, who he was sure was his son Lester, for a Boston barque was in port at the time, and several of her crew recognized him.

"From that day my step-father, who had been quite kind to my sisters and myself since the going away of his son, again became terribly severe.

"One of my sisters ran off and got married, and she certainly did not make her condition any worse.

"The other got a position as governess in a Southern family, and that left me alone at home to face the constant displeasure of my step-father.

"One night he beat me severely because I told him he was breaking my poor mother's heart, and when dawn came I had shipped on a coasting vessel as cabin-boy.

"I made an unlucky selection in my craft, Captain Dare, for it proved to be a smuggler, and it was a year before I could make my escape.

"But the hard knocks and rough experience I got made a good sailor of me.

"When I did get a chance to escape I left the smugglers with the belief that I had been drowned, for I had found a boat one day that had drifted upon the island, and they knew nothing about it.

"I was in the habit of going for a swim every night, and this time I carried with me other clothes, left those I wore upon the rocks, and put off in the yawl.

"I was picked up at sea by a vessel which was bound to the West Indies, and some weeks after, lured by a false beacon, we were wrecked in a storm.

"I was sick below decks at the time, and that saved my life, for all the others in the vessel were lost.

"The next morning the wreckers came off to the wreck, and at first I supposed they would kill me, but they spared me and made a slave of me.

"I was forced to light the false beacon on stormy nights, and do all the work to be done; but I was plotting an escape all the time, and after a long time my chance came, for the wreckers sailed for Kingston with their booty in their little sloop, having left me alone on the island, certain that I could never escape.

"But one morning I awoke to see a vessel becalmed three leagues away.

"The tide was setting out, and would run for several hours, so I rigged some spars, set a staff with a flag upon it, and with an oar and some provisions started upon my voyage.

"Had it not been for the flag, I would have drifted by, for I did not go within a league of the vessel.

"But, waving the flag constantly I was seen and a boat sent to me and I was saved.

"The vessel was a brig, bound from Baltimore to Havana, and I was kindly cared for by her captain.

"Arriving at Havana I went to school, for I had some money I had kept hidden away all the time, and thus a year passed, when I shipped for Lima, Peru.

"Thus, going from vessel to vessel I passed two more years drifting about the world, and at last shipped upon a coaster bound from Sisal to Vera Cruz and we were captured by Lamonte the Red Rover of the Lagoons, and it was either walk the plank or turn pirate, and so I chose to live and be a buccaneer," and Clover laughed lightly at the remembrance, while Captain Dare said:

"I must hear the rest of your story, Clover, and now."

CHAPTER XXXV.

CLOVER'S PLEDGE.

"So you thought it best to be a live buccaneer rather than a dead sailor lad, Clover?" said Captain Dare with a smile at the man-

ner in which the boy had said he had turned pirate.

"There was no choice, sir," for Lamonte meant just what he threatened he would do, if we did not ship under his black flag.

"He had been chased by an American cruiser and though he escaped he lost a number of men, so gave the half dozen of us on the coaster the alternative of walking the plank or joining him."

"How many walked the plank, Clover?"

"Not a single one of us, sir, and I believe that those I had shipped with were half pirates anyhow.

"I served with Lamonte at sea for several months before he put into port, and of course I did my duty, for it was not wise for me not to do so.

"Then he put in for his retreat for repairs, and there I got acquainted with its surroundings and all about it.

"I discovered that he had only lately been made chief, from having saved the former leader from capture one day in Havana by hearing two Government officers arranging a plan to capture the buccaneer whose vessel was then in port.

"From what they said Lamonte knew where to find the pirate craft, which was disguised in port, and went aboard and gave the alarm.

"Captain Chevallo made him his lieutenant, and dying of a wound received some months later, he left the command to the young pirate.

"At the retreat was Chevallo's wife and daughter, the former a lovely, refined, sad-faced lady; and the latter a beautiful girl of seventeen.

"The maiden had taken a desperate fancy to Lamonte, and they were to be married when she was eighteen years of age.

"I was sorry to know this, and liking the girl immensely myself, I was often with her and her mother.

"One day Lamonte came to where we were, seated upon the bluff talking together, for I was trying to get her to escape with her mother, and what money they had, and Lamonte was so infuriated that he drew his pistol and fired upon me.

"Here is the scar his bullet made on my forehead; but it glanced and only half-stunned me, though I fell from the bluff into the lake.

"Having done this he walked away, believing that he had killed me, while, revived by the water, I swam ashore, and, seen by Felice Chevallo, she came to my aid.

"To let Lamonte believe that I was alive would be my certain death, so I kept in hiding for a week, when he sailed, and Felice brought me food every night.

"One night she slipped a boat away from the harborage, a stanch skiff decked over, and with stump mast and bowsprit.

"She brought it to where I was hiding, and then left, to get a bag of provisions which she had prepared.

"Then she told me to go my way if I would make her one pledge.

"This I promised, and she bade me farewell."

"And the pledge?"

"Was that I would not reveal the secret of the Lagoon Retreat for one year from that night, and in that time she hoped to marry Lamonte, for she was infatuated with the man, and get him to give up his lawless life and move away to another land with her mother and herself.

"This he had promised to do, and she wished to give him the benefit of the year in which to keep his word.

"I gave her my solemn pledge and then rowed across the lake, down the lagoons and out in the Gulf.

"When morning dawned I was leagues away, and keeping close along shore.

"In this way I made for Corpus Christi, and arriving there took a berth as cabin-boy on a vessel bound to Charleston, South Carolina.

"There I left the ship and one night I took the part of a poor sailor, who was being roughly handled, and a man attacked me with his knife.

"I drew my knife and met his attack, and to save my life took his.

"Fearful of the consequences to myself, an almost penniless lad in a strange town accused of murder, I ran to the shore, and

swam down the harbor to a vessel-of-war which was just preparing to sail.

"I was given a berth on board, and at last thought I saw my way clear to win a name and a fortune, for I was determined to rise to the quarter-deck in time."

"But your hopes were then blasted, Clover?" said Captain Dare kindly.

"Yes sir, and I guess I am to blame for it."

"How so?"

"Well, sir, my early life had blunted my sensibilities, I suppose, and my career as a smuggler, wrecker and pirate had in no way improved me, for I had become what might be called a *tough youth*.

"The trouble was that I was too full of mischief, and I had on board the vessel-of-war as mates, a parrot, monkey and some other animals, all of which were quite chummy with me, and I trained them to my own way until they became worse than a pestilence in the ship.

"The result was that I was cordially hated by all of the officers except the captain, who was my friend unto his death, for he died at sea of a wound.

"But he had made me an active middy, for services rendered, and when he died I lost my friend and protector.

"Set upon by the younger officers I defended myself, and in a general scuffle struck a lieutenant who was trying to protect me.

"This made him angry, and I was at once seized, dismissed from my rank, and the cat-o'-nine-tails was called for to be introduced to my bare back.

"Then I skipped aloft, ran out on the yard and sprung into the sea, and, as I am a splendid swimmer I reached the shore, a league distant, and next turned up as a messenger in the Monte Casino in Vera Cruz."

"A remarkable career, indeed, my brave lad; but about this pledge to the pretty pirate?"

"The year is not yet up, sir, and I'll keep my pledge until it is—then I'll pilot you there!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE REFUSAL.

CAPTAIN CECIL DARE had been a most attentive listener to the story of the lad's life whose path had so strangely crossed his own, and so fortunately.

He believed that Clover had told him the whole truth, for he did not think he was a boy to keep back anything, no matter how black it was against himself.

Clover had no bad habits, for he had not seen him drink, heard him utter an oath, and he had told him that he had never gambled or become profane.

So he decided to question the boy a little more and asked:

"Do you gamble, Clover?"

"No, sir; I never bet on a card in my life."

"How is it that I have never seen you smoking the *cigarritos* that most boys smoke in Mexico?"

"Well, sir, my mother asked me to promise her I would not smoke until I grew to be a man, and I will not break my promise."

"I don't think you are profane, either."

"Oh, no, Captain Dare; I never utter an oath."

"I suppose you have learned to take your grog regularly?"

"No, sir; I am under the same promise about drinking I am with smoking, though I have taken a glass of grog, I admit, when worn out and wet at times."

"Then you are a most model young pirate, Clover," said Captain Dare, with a laugh.

"Yes, sir; and thank you."

"You are one that most boys I know might copy after, in spite of your having been a smuggler, wrecker and buccaneer."

"You see, sir, I was forced to become what they made me; but I never took my share of pirate booty, sir; or rather, I never used it, for I gave it away to the men."

"Had I taken my prize-money I would have now some thousands in gold, instead of a hundred or so pesos."

"You are an honest fellow, Clover, and though you lost your midgy's berth on one American vessel, my word for it that you will get it upon another."

"Now, I am anxious to run this pirate Lamonte to his lair, and you can pilot me there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Should he not be there, I can capture his stronghold and await his return to take him."

"Yes, sir, it can be done."

"Well, then, be my pilot to the Lagoon Lair of Lamonte, and you shall be a full-fledged midshipman in this schooner the day you drop an-

chor in the waters of the stronghold," and Cecil Dare looked fixedly at the youth.

It was evident that Clover was deeply moved for a few minutes at the words of the captain, but at last he said in a low, earnest tone:

"Captain Dare, you have taken me by the hand and been most kind to me indeed.

"You are all I have to care for me, unless it be my poor mother so far away, and I would do all in my power to gain your regard.

"But, Captain Dare, as dearly as I would love to return to my mother and sisters wearing the rank of a midshipman, won by my own acts, I would not do so if I had to betray the girl to whom I pledged my word that I would not betray her Lagoon Lair for one year.

"She saved my life, and, bad as he is, she loves Lamonte, and I gave her my pledge not to betray him for the time stated, and, sir, I cannot, will not."

The two had descended from the deck into the brilliantly lighted cabin, and, as the youth now sat opposite to Captain Dare the latter gazed fixedly at him, and his face grew harsh, his look stern.

"Boy, do you know that upon your own confession, I could hang you to the yard-arm as a pirate?"

The voice and manner of Dare had changed. Clover started at his words and turned pale, but did not flinch and frankly responded:

"Yes, sir, I believe that you could have me hanged."

"Then take the choice between hanging and betraying your pirate captain, Lamonte."

"Oh, Captain Dare!"

"Which shall it be, boy—you to pilot the Sea Soldier to the lair of the Red Flag Rover or hang from the yard-arm?" and Captain Dare half rose from his seat, menacingly.

"I will keep my pledge to Felice the pirate's daughter, if you hang me to the yard-arm, Captain Dare," was the boy sailor's firm response.

"Yet you joined the pirates to save your life, yes, became a smuggler, ay, and a wrecker, setting false beacons to lure ships to wreck, their crews to death," sternly said Cecil Dare.

"Captain Dare, I was not a smuggler, but held as a prisoner on an island with smugglers and made to work for them.

"I was not a wrecker, for never did a vessel go to wreck through false beacon lighted by me. I always shielded the light, and would go before dawn to take down the cover, and had I been caught by the wreckers I would have been killed.

"I became one of a pirate crew to save my life, but never blow did I strike, nor did I take the gold won by the capture of prizes.

"Now you ask me to betray the poor girl who saved my life, by breaking my pledge to her, and I say that I will hang first."

"When will the year be up?"

"Within three months, sir."

Captain Dare arose from his seat and crossing over to the lad grasped his hand, while he said in a voice that trembled with emotion:

"My brave young friend, never did I in all my life meet a nobler-hearted lad than you, and it will be a sad day to me if I forfeit your friendship.

"I believed that you would yield to the temptation to betray the Lagoon Pirates, but now I know that you would have died at the yard-arm rather than do so.

"I was only trying you, so forgive me. Stick to your refusal until you do your duty without breaking your pledge to Felice, the pretty pirate to whom you owe your life."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SECRET OF A TREASURE.

CLOVER was delighted at the change in the manner of Captain Dare, for he had believed his assumed stern bearing and words to be in dead earnest.

He now felt that the captain understood him thoroughly, and also admired him for what he had done.

Anxious to prove this appreciation of what Cecil Dare had done for him, he said in a thoughtful way:

"Captain Dare, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, Clover."

"Please tell me again just how you came to rescue Senorita Ravera and beat off Lamonte."

"I will do so with pleasure," returned Dare, feeling confident that the youth had some deep motive for the wish expressed, and which he was willing to gratify.

So he told the story of his putting into the lagoons for repairs, and discovering the chase of the yacht of Don Ramon by the Red Rover of the Lagoons, and what followed.

"You supposed you had killed the chief, sir?"

"I met him an instant only, and received a wound from him, which I am surprised was not made fatal, for he had the power to make it so.

"Somehow I supposed that I had seen him before, and, as he fell, as I believed, mortally wounded, I had him borne to his cabin, and then I, too, fell from faintness, having received three wounds and bled profusely.

"That there was still life enough in Lamonte for devilry not a man on the vessel believed;

but he was cleverly playing possum, as we say in the States, and was but slightly wounded. He slipped out at the stern ports and escaped in the darkness.

"Many more of his men had leaped overboard, and were swimming shoreward. The pirate chief picked up enough of them to board Don Ramon's yacht, a quarter of a mile distant and escape, for the devil got him up a breeze just then which did not reach us for some time after."

"He is a superb swimmer, sir, and it was just like him to turn defeat into victory by going to the yacht and seizing her.

"But, you held his vessel?"

"Yes."

"And where did you take her?"

"She was in bad condition, but my first officer carried the Don and Senorita Ravera on to their home in it, while the Don's lugger was dispatched to the lagoon after my vessel.

"I was rather seriously wounded, so remained at the hacienda until able to be up again, and meanwhile had sent the prize, the pirate craft, to New Orleans under an officer and crew.

"When I sailed in my schooner I picked the prize crew up off the Balize and Lieutenant Orville told me that he had arrived in New Orleans with the frigate *goleta* in wretched condition and had placed her in the hands of agents to be sold, according to my orders from my Government if a prize is not worth being made into a vessel-of-war."

"Did he name any price, sir?"

"No, but said for what she would bring, which was not a great deal at the best, say five thousand dollars."

"Was there much plunder on board, sir?"

"No, for he had just come from his lair, and made no captures since."

"And the prisoners?"

"Were left on board until she was sold and then they were to be sent to the *carcel* to be held until orders came for their trial."

"Pardon me, Captain Dare, but how long has the *goleta* been at New Orleans on sale?"

"Two months, or more, for Orville did not take her there until I was nearly able to take command of my schooner again."

"Do you think she is sold, sir?"

"I fear not."

"And I hope not, sir."

"But why?"

"That is a very valuable vessel, Captain Dare."

"Nonsense, Clover."

"I mean it, sir."

"She could be made so by repairs, and is a good craft for speed; but, she needs overhauling from keel to truck."

"I might as well at once tell you, sir, that she has a most valuable treasure on board."

"No, for as I said, she had very little booty, and really nothing of value."

"Captain Dare, there is a secret receptacle on the *goleta* in which Lamonte has hidden away the richest treasures he has taken and Chief Chevallo before him."

"Do you mean this, Clover?"

"I do, sir, and only the maiden Felice, besides Lamonte, knows how to find the secret box."

"Of course he had no chance to remove the treasure, so it is upon the vessel now, and I would not be surprised if Lamonte discovered where you sent the vessel and would go and cut her out, or buy her."

"You are right, and upon the strength of what you tell me I will at once sail for New Orleans and we must find the treasure-box."

"I can do it, sir, for I was shown a model of the vessel one day by Felice, for her father made it and had it built, and not a man who had aught to do with the building was allowed to sail in her."

"Felice told me of the secret hiding-place, but did not say where it was, but in looking at the model I discovered it, I am sure, so could find it, if I could not discover the spring that opens it."

"Well, Clover, to New Orleans we go at once, and I hope we will arrive in time to save the treasure, which must be considerable from what you say."

"I know, sir, that Felice said that all of her father's wealth was there in precious stones, gold and jewelry, and Lamonte has doubtless added to the amount."

"Then it is ho for the treasure craft, Clover," said Captain Dare, and he went on deck and gave orders to lay the course directly for the mouth of the Mississippi and to press on all sail possible.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SEA ARROW'S RETURN.

It was a lazy, listless life led by those at the retreat in the lagoon, known as the Lair of the Rovers.

Many of those there enjoyed it, because they had nothing to do and plenty to eat and time to sleep, with a share of pirate treasure in the bargain.

They were a wild lot, men, women and children alike, desperate characters most of them.

The men were all outlaws, red-handed sons of the sea who would kill to get gold.

The retreat has been described, and yet not the home where dwelt the sad-faced mother and daughter of the former chief, Chevallo the Corsair.

Hard as were the men, reckless as were all in that band, they owed a perfect allegiance to the wife of their old chief and her daughter.

Felice was known to all as "Our Queen," and her every word was implicitly obeyed, her request was law.

Of her past she knew but little.

She was born upon the sea, had played about the decks when a mere baby, and as she grew toward womanhood her mother, who often went to sea with her father, had taken her to New Orleans in the lugger in which the booty was taken twice a year to be sold.

As a coaster captain no one knew the famous rover, and he and his wife had placed their daughter in a boarding-school, among the children of rich and fashionable parents, to receive her education.

They could rely upon her discretion, and she never betrayed that the dark-faced, handsome man who visited her twice each year as her father, was Chevallo the Buccaneer whose name was a terror upon the sea.

All she knew of her mother's life was that she had loved her father and married him in spite of all opposition.

She knew that he was the victim of a cruel wrong which had turned his heart to bitterness and his hand to crime.

She did not excuse this act of his, but clung to him through all.

This Felice knew of her mother's life, and also that her father had left them a fortune, gained by piracy though it was.

And this fortune Lamonte had in his possession, or at least the bulk of it, and was she not to become his wife? She had become infatuated with the young buccaneer lieutenant, and he had pledged her dying father in turn to give up piracy, make her his wife and carry her mother and herself far away where they could dwell with no shadow upon them except what was in their hearts.

Felice had been four years at boarding-school, and she had returned to her old private life, to feel how fearful a one it was for her father, her mother and herself to lead.

At first she was wretchedly unhappy, and then Lamonte crossed her path, and love made her content, at least with her surroundings.

So matters stood when the lad, Clover, had come to the retreat, and she had been drawn strangely toward the handsome lad, and they became devoted friends.

Clover's quick intelligence took in the situation of the mother and her daughter, and he felt assured that Lamonte only wished to be sure that he could not get possession of the treasure which he believed Senora Chevallo held back, to cast off the mother and daughter and rob them of what he himself had in keeping for them.

At last Felice began to feel that her lover did not act honestly with her, and his having kidnapped Rachel Ravera more than ever convinced her that he was playing some bold game, perhaps one to be false to her.

This aroused all the jealousy in her naturally jealous nature, and she determined to know all about it when he again put in to the stronghold.

The home of the mother and daughter was a pleasant one, not such by any means as one would expect there among the lagoons.

There was modern furniture in the commodious cabin, and many articles from many lands, taken from vessels coming from all parts of the world.

A handsome negress served as maid and cook, and all about the little house was cleanly and inviting.

The scene was a grand though weird one, overlooking the lake, with lagoons stretching away from it in several different directions.

The lake was a pleasant place to sail, and the lagoons, ridge and banks were covered with wild flowers.

The ridge ran back inland for miles, bordered on either side by lagoons, and a path led to the further end, which was often traversed by the mother and daughter in their rambles.

Such was the home of the pirate's wife and daughter, and back to the stronghold came the yacht one pleasant afternoon some months after her sailing under the red flag with its golden arrow in it.

Seated upon the broad piazza of their cabin the mother and daughter were talking together when the measured sound of oars fell upon their ears and soon there emerged from the lagoon an eight-oared boat, having in tow the captured yacht.

"It is the Sea Arrow!"

"Ah, mother, he has returned once more," cried Felice joyfully, and seizing her glass she leveled it upon the pirate craft, by no means looking so trim and pretty as when she had sailed away from the stronghold.

The sails were furled and the yacht was towed to an anchorage under the cliff where the anchor was let fall and the next moment a tall form

stepped into the barge, which came alongside and was rowed shoreward.

"It is Captain Lamonte, mother, and I am so glad," cried Felice, and she hastened to improve her personal appearance to greet her lover, who soon after came at a brisk step toward the cabin.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A LOVERS' QUARREL.

ONE glance into the face of the young pirate chief was sufficient to show to Felice that he was not in a pleasant humor.

He came forward and greeted her mother and herself abruptly, and almost immediately said:

"I have found out what has been done with the *goleta*."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Chevallo coldly, not at all liking the manner of Lamonte.

She did not like the man and never had; but had yielded to Felice in her wish to marry him, like one who had no aim in life and accepted all things as a matter of course.

If she could only make Felice see the man as she did she would be glad, and if they could go away together, with what money they had, then perhaps one gleam of happiness might at last come to her clouded life.

"I say that I know what has become of my *goleta*," angrily repeated the pirate.

"Why do you care for the *goleta* when she was in such a wretched condition and you have that splendid yacht in her place?" asked Mrs. Chevallo.

"You seem to forget that my treasure is on board?"

"Ah, yes, the treasure my husband left in the secret receptacle upon the schooner?"

"So it is," quietly said the woman.

"Yes, the treasure which your husband left, and which I added to; it is all there."

"And therefore lost."

"No, for no one knows the secret, and it could never be found unless they broke the *goleta* up."

"But where is the *goleta*?" asked Mrs. Chevallo.

"In New Orleans."

"Then of course the treasure is lost to us."

"You don't know me, woman, if you think so."

The face of the pirate's wife flushed, but Felice at once spoke up and in a tone that showed she was very angry:

"Captain Lamonte, in addressing my mother you will show her the proper respect, or you shall not remain chief of the Lagoon Rovers."

"Ha! what does this mean?" he cried almost savagely.

"It means just what I said, that you shall address my mother, yes, and myself with respect."

"Well, this is rich indeed, to be dictated to by you, when I command."

"See here, sir, you were left in command by my father, and you were left his treasure, my mother and myself to care for; but you must remember that you are not to rule us, nor shall you."

Madam Chevallo said nothing, and at heart she was glad to see Felice turn upon the man who had before treated them with almost contempt.

"Mutiny, as I live, and by a girl."

"I will have to put a rough check on you, Felice, if you do not curb your tongue."

"I defy you, sir, to make the attempt."

"Ha! you defy me?"

"Yes."

"I will show you that I rule here, girl!"

"One minute, before you do aught that you will regret for if you dare to summon the people it will be you, as captain, against me as queen, and your good sense should convince you that the Rovers of the Lagoon are pledged unto death to their late chief's wife and daughter."

The man flinched at this.

He knew that it was just as Felice had said, but he remarked with a sneer:

"So you have been sowing the seeds of mutiny in the band since I left?"

"Call your own crew, from the Sea Arrow, for they have been with you, and consequently could not have been under my mutinous spirit."

"Let them decide whether, if it comes to a contest, you or I rule here, Captain Lamonte?"

The pirate knew that he dared not put it to the test, for he would lose.

That he was popular with his men, a good commander and the acknowledged chief of the Rovers of the Lagoons, he knew; but when it came to which they would give up, himself or Felice Chevallo, their queen, he well knew that at her bidding they would hang him to the yard-arm.

He saw that he had gone too far, that his anger had caused him to forget himself and that now he must eat "humble pie."

But he mentally determined that he should eventually rule the band, and that so dangerous a woman as Felice should be gotten rid of.

A superstitious feeling held the hearts and lives of the band to Felice, and should they disobey her command then they would have only ill-fortune, they believed.

So the pirate captain yielded quickly and gracefully.

"My dear Felice, I was too hasty, and I

should not have shown my temper toward your mother, and then to you.

"But I was worried, angry, and I crave pardon for it."

At once the face of Felice, which had become stern and defiant, changed to smiles, and she replied pleasantly:

"Don't cause me to speak in anger to you again, Lamonte, for there should be no quarrel between us."

"Now tell us what has worried you, and about the *goleta*?"

Madam Chevallo was sorry to see the "make-up," but said nothing, and Captain Lamonte, his whole manner now changed, threw himself into a chair and said:

"You know that the treasure is in the secret receptacle in the *goleta*, and that we must not lose it, so I have been trying to find out where that American captain sent the vessel, and only was successful in doing so a few days ago, for a prisoner told me that my vessel was in New Orleans, and in the hands of an agent to be sold."

"I had hoped to recapture that Mexican heiress, Don Ravera's daughter, for I can get a clear quarter of a million ransom for her, and that, with the treasure on the *goleta*, would enable us to give up piracy, and go to some place to live in luxury and happiness; but the Don, I find, has fortified the pass into his harbor, and so I dare not boldly run in, and must await my return from New Orleans before I kidnap the Senorita Ravera."

"Captain Lamonte, you shall not kidnap the Senorita Ravera," firmly said Felice, and her face became stern again and defiant.

CHAPTER XL.

THE BUGLE-CALL.

AGAIN did the face of Lamonte flush with anger at the words of Felice.

Was he to be governed in this way by a girl?

He knew that he did not care for the pirate's daughter, beautiful, intelligent and refined though she was, for his fickle nature had changed since seeing Rachel Ravera.

He was determined to capture her, and his vanity was such that he believed he could win her over into becoming his wife.

He had always been admired by women, and he supposed that he was irresistible.

So he had determined to kidnap Rachel again, then go to New Orleans and get the treasure from the *goleta*, after which he would leave the band, the pirate's wife and daughter, and go his way alone.

He did not doubt but that in time he could get rid of Don Ramon in some sinister way, when Rachel would be the heiress to all that vast fortune, which would accordingly pass into his hands.

Such was his plot, and he had stood in by night to boldly kidnap the maiden, but going in a small boat to reconnoiter, he had discovered that the pass was fortified.

Supposing that there were Mexican artillerymen stationed there, he at once retreated, determined to accomplish by strategy what he could not do by force.

This put him in an ill humor, especially as he had made no valuable captures of late, and that ill humor he had vented upon Madam Chevallo and Rachel until the latter resented it, as has been seen.

Then deciding to go first to New Orleans, he had made known his intention of kidnapping Senorita Ravera.

He had, from his various prizes, gotten a full battery for his vessel, and also a crew of ninety men, so that he felt in a degree invincible if he could only keep out of the way of large cruisers, for small ones he did not fear.

His overwhelming conceit was getting the better of his judgment, and he sailed the seas under his blood-red flag as though he held a commission in his pocket from the most powerful government upon the earth.

Now, when he made known his plan, Felice put her little foot down against it in a manner that showed she meant to be obeyed.

As though to support her daughter, Madam Chevallo said:

"Yes, Captain Lamonte, I happen to know that the treasure on board of the *goleta*, if not yet found, amounts to a very large fortune."

"Then you are in possession of more booty, and I have a certain sum here in jewels, all of which are sufficient to enable us to carry out my dead husband's wishes and give up our lawless career, going where, unknown to all, we can atone for the past."

"Upon these conditions, and that you were to make Felice your wife, when she reached her eighteenth year, he made you his heir as chief of the Lagoon Rovers."

"Now you refer to kidnapping a young lady and holding her for ransom."

Lamonte listened impatiently to Madam Chevallo's words, and now responded:

"As chief of this band and the protector of yourself and daughter, senora, my duty is to seek your interests, and in kidnapping a girl, who is worth a quarter of a million to me, I feel that I am doing so."

"But we have more than enough without that

ransom, if you get what the *goleta* has on board," urged Madam Chevallo.

"Well, I differ with you and I shall make the capture."

"Captain Lamonte, I say that you shall not," and it was Felice who spoke now.

"I say that you shall not decoy an innocent girl to this place of infamy, to hold her to rob her father, through his affection for his child, of his large fortune."

"I shall do as I deem best where the interests of the band are concerned," was the sullen reply of the pirate.

"Very well, as before, I shall put it to the test, for I shall command disobedience to your orders by your crew, in this case."

"Not a man would dare mutiny against me."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it."

Felice stepped into the cabin and in a moment returned with a small silver bugle, on which she blew a thrilling call.

Too late did Lamonte spring toward her to prevent it, for never having heard her secret call to the people before, he did not know what she was doing until suddenly it dawned upon him.

"By heaven! you have dared call the people," he said through his shut teeth.

"See!"

As she spoke the men from their quarters were seen coming at a double-quick toward the queen's cabin, and two boats crowded with men at once put off from the pirate vessel.

"Now, Captain Lamonte, if you wish to test your power against mine, order back to their ship your own crew, and those people coming from the camps," said Felice with a sneer.

"By heaven! I will," cried the pirate. "I will not be defied by a girl!"

Then raising his voice he called out:

"Ho those boats!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Return to your vessel until further orders!"

"Not until the queen's bugle sounds the recall, senor," came the response from an officer in the leading boat, and Lamonte saw that the people from the camps were still coming on, regardless of his command to go back.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE HUNT FOR THE TREASURE.

FELICE was perfectly cool. She showed no sign that it was to be a test of power between herself and the pirate chief, over the desperate band coming at her call.

As the people drew nearer she said calmly:

"I leave it for you to test them, Captain Lamonte."

But the pirate captain already considered himself beaten.

The reply from the officer of the boat from his own vessel proved that he must yield.

So he decided to get out of a bad scrape gracefully, and with a smile on his face but curses in his heart said:

"You have again triumphed, Felice."

"No better bride could a pirate chief wish than you."

Then he turned to the people and said:

"You are called for a purpose you shall soon know."

Felice and her mother looked surprised.

What was the pirate going to do?

Soon the boats' crews arrived, and raising his voice, as they all gathered around the headquarters cabin, Lamonte said:

"My people, your queen called for you, and I desire to say that when the *goleta* was captured she took with her the treasure belonging to your former chief and to you all, and it is hidden in a secret place on the vessel."

"Taken as a prize the *goleta* was sent by her captor, an American officer, to New Orleans, and thither it is my intention to go and get her."

"It is said that she has been put up for sale, and as it will be no easy task to cut a vessel out from an American port, I shall buy her, and I desire you all to make a contribution from the funds you have on hand for that purpose, as the Sea Arrow's treasury is at low ebb just now in money, though we have plenty of booty."

"If I cut out the *goleta* your money will not be needed, but if I purchase her, what you get in return for your gold will be a thousand per cent."

"I will head the subscription for Senora Chevallo, Felice, your queen and myself with one thousand pesos."

This cunning speech was well received by all, except the mother and daughter, for they knew that Lamonte had plenty of money in hand to purchase the *goleta* if it had to be done, even though the sum asked for her was a large one.

As for the Senora Chevallo she was amazed at the cleverness of the pirate captain in extricating himself from what appeared to be a very awkward situation, and she only hoped that the position in which he had been placed and had to twice recede from would change the opinion of her daughter regarding him.

If she could only open the eyes of Felice to the true nature of the man she was infatuated with, she would be really happy.

Chief Chevallo had been a pirate, it was true,

but then outside of his lawless career there was much that was noble in his character.

He had clung to her as strongly as she had to him, and his people had idolized him, one and all.

With Lamonte it was different, for self was the one the young pirate looked out for all the time.

His nature was despicable, his actions small, and all that he had to recommend him was his handsome face and form, added to his undoubted skill as a sailor, and courage.

Of nerve he had a sufficient quantity to have made him a great captain had he been a good man.

The people came up soon with their mites to the fund of purchase-money for the *goleta*, and the crew bade the captain call upon them when he returned on board the ship.

Then they all dispersed and the mother and daughter were left alone with Lamonte.

If they expected to see a look of shame upon his face for his defeat by a young girl, pirate captain though he was, they were disappointed.

He sat smiling blankly at the situation and said complacently:

"You see, Felice, that the people, one and all, have money when they think they can get money by giving it up."

"Now under no other plea could I have gotten them to contribute, and if I do not get the *goleta* out, they must pay their share."

"But if I see half a chance I'll take her and save the contribution."

"When do you leave?" asked Felice coldly.

"To-morrow, for I wish to reach there before she is sold."

"Should she be sold?"

"Then I shall have to find out who purchased her and where she has gone."

"And will follow her?"

"Of course, for that is a fortune which the *goleta* has hidden away on board."

"Very well, but should you fail to find the *goleta*, and consequently lose the treasure, remember you are not to kidnap the Senorita Ravera."

"Perhaps you may be persuaded into allowing her capture, Felice?"

"Never! gold you may get under the flag you carry, but the moment you make war upon a woman to get it, that moment I will prove that my power in this band is greater than yours."

"You know now how I feel, and my mother shares my views, so let the matter drop."

"Certainly, if you desire, Felice," and the response came with a smile, but the look of Satan shone in his eyes.

The next day the *Sea Arrow* hoisted her red flag and sailed on her hunt for the treasure.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MEXICAN SPY.

AFTER the sailing of the Mexican brig-of-war *Relentless*, under her gallant commander, Captain Almo Urbana, the Government and the people looked for wonders to be performed by the new cruiser.

She was of a beautiful model, stanch in a gale as a line-of-battle ship, and her speed had been reported as wonderful.

Then she was armed with a splendid battery of fifteen guns, three of which were pivots of large caliber, mounted fore, aft and amidships, giving the broadside their aid, making it a fire of nine guns.

Then the small-arms were of the latest improved kind, the two largest boats had howitzers in them, for running into the lagoon where the brig could not go, and the crew of the *Relentless* counted all told one hundred and ten men.

Those who had really invested their money in her, where others supposed that Captain Almo Urbana had done so, expected great results from the capture of prizes.

Especially were the pirate vessels taken expected to pan out well.

The buccaneers of the Gulf were very numerous, in spite of the many cruisers of different nationalities on the watch for them constantly.

From them the shipping of Mexico, especially the coasting vessels, suffered greatly, and Captain Urbana had been the very man, the Junta thought, to send after these lawless rovers.

Banker Luis Escalon and Henrico Valverde were more anxious to have the *Relentless* hunt down rich pirates than the other enemies of Mexico, for they had an eye upon the treasure to be thus gained.

They had invested their money in the brig more for this purpose than any other, never thinking that Valverde being a robber ashore, and Escalon the receiver of stolen goods, it was a case of dog eat dog for the *Relentless* to wage war against sea rovers.

For Almo Urbana neither of his backers cared a peso.

He was an able commander, and was a good tool to make their money pay a larger percentage.

What course he took to do so they little cared.

Cunning as they were they never thought for an instant that the captain might overreach them.

So it was with considerable excitement that one day Valverde returned from his usual monthly trip to the mountains—"his mines," as he put it, and sought the home of Banker Luis Escalon.

He was accompanied by a villainous-looking *vaquero*, whom he had brought with him from his mountain retreat.

Escalon had them ushered at once into his private room, where he sat enjoying his after-dinner cigar and an extra bottle of wine.

He had just disposed of a large amount of Valverde's plunder, along with the booty sent him by a coast smuggler, and the pirates had been most liberal, so that he was in love with himself so to speak.

"Ah, Senor Valverde, I am delighted to see you—Oh! you have a—friend with you," and he hesitated before he uttered the word friend after getting a glimpse of the face of the man with Valverde.

"Yes, I am just back from the mountains, after a stay of two weeks, and Madras here has some news which I wish you to hear."

"Certainly, senor, I will be glad to listen to anything you have to say."

"I am the captain's spy, senor, and he sent me coastward to find out if the haciendas that way were worth raiding."

"I came to one more like a palace than a rancho's home, and with a fort guarding it from attack by water."

"The rancho had a force of half a hundred *vaqueros* looking after his vast herds of cattle and horses, and two-score servants."

"I pretended to be looking for work and it was given to me."

"The rancho was Don Ramon Ravera, and his daughter, a most beautiful girl, dwells with him."

"The hacienda is full of silver plate and riches, the senorita having jewels worth a fortune."

"I saw there too in the harbor a brig-of-war flying the eagle and serpent flag."

"Her captain was Senor Almo Urbana, and he had been at anchor in the harbor for two weeks."

"It was said that he was in love with the senorita, and hoped to marry her, and the people said he meant to remain there until she consented to become his wife, for she is in love with some one, an American sailor it was said."

"As tapping the hacienda of Don Ramon Ravera would bring a fortune, I gave up my place on the plea of illness, which I feigned, and returned to report to Captain Valverde."

"Well, Escalon, you have heard Madras's story?"

"Yes, Valverde."

"It is my desire to send him back to the hacienda."

"Why?"

"With a letter for Captain Urbana for one reason, and another to glean more news if he can so as to lead a band upon the hacienda some night and get the riches there."

"Not a bad idea, indeed; but the letter to Urbana?"

"Must ask him why he lies idly at anchor in the harbor of Don Ramon, when he should be at sea looking to our interests."

"He has been gone nearly a month now, and I supposed had won us rich prizes, when here he is utterly idle making love to a girl who certainly will not marry him if she can help it."

"Then let us write him a letter conjointly, send it by Madras, and it will show him that we have our eyes upon his movements when and where he little dreams of it."

"The very thing."

The letter was accordingly written, and after a substantial meal in Escalon's home and a couple of golden *onzas*, Madras was dispatched to the hacienda of Don Ramon, with orders to ride with all haste, and then to remain there as a spy, while he must take a man with him from the band, or make some arrangements with a coaster, to send word to Vera Cruz at least twice a month of what was going on there.

CHAPTER XLIII.

CAPTAIN URBANA'S RUSE.

CAPTAIN ALMO URBANA was greatly disappointed at not seeing Rachel at dinner, the day of his arrival at the hacienda.

He feared that he had been too abrupt in his manner of showing her what the American was, according to his manner of stating the case.

He was sure now that she loved Cecil Dare and he ground his teeth in rage at the thought, for in his way he loved her and did not wish her holding regard for another.

He had tried to paint Cecil Dare in the very worst colors possible, and yet appear to do so innocently, as though he knew not of the interest which she held in him, or really knew him.

Then he seemed deeply pained when discovering the true state of affairs, and would not remain the guest of the Don that night, in spite of his urging, but returned on board ship with his two officers.

The next morning Rachel received a note from him which ran in this wise:

"ON BOARD MEXICAN BRIG-OF-WAR,

RELENTLESS.

"MY RESPECTED SENORITA RAVERA!—

"I am more distressed than you can imagine, at what now to me appears as my cruel words to you of yesterday."

"Wholly unaware of your even holding the acquaintance of the American officer, and feeling a natural bitterness in my heart against one who has left his mark upon me for life, I spoke perhaps too strongly in the charge I made against him."

"Had I dreamed the truth, I would never have dropped anchor in the Hacienda Harbor."

"But having done so, and made my story known to you, as I knew it all, and finding that I had wounded to the quick one whom I would die to save from one pang of sorrow or pain, I sought to have my officers see you that perhaps they might differ with her, thus giving you a straw of hope to cling to."

"The result of their coming your good father has doubtless made known to you, and I can only hold out to you one ray of hope to cling to until you know the real truth."

"This hope is that perhaps there may be two men, so much alike as not to know them apart, claiming to be one and the same."

"Perhaps that the true man who rescued you may have a twin brother, or a double, who from some feeling of revenge may be dogging him about the seas, and the false man may be the one whom I met in Vera Cruz."

"This seems like a romancing proposition, yet stranger things have occurred, and I have known of men, and women, too, who have had doubles who gave them no end of trouble, caused them untold sorrow."

"With this hope I am willing to at once put to sea to solve the mystery for you."

"I am, or will be at your wish, my own master to serve you, and will cruise till I can find the one, or both, if two there be, of these Americans."

"How glad will I be if I prove my theory a correct one and give happiness to you, and to him, whatever the pain may be to me to see another claim you."

"Still, only true love can be unselfish, and such is the feeling I have for you."

"Pardon me, but I will not again offend, and you may regard me as you would a loving brother."

"Heaven hold you in keeping, and believe me

Your devoted servant,

"ALMO URBANA."

This letter was handed to Rachel by her maid when she arose the next morning, after a sleepless night.

She read it carefully through twice, and recalled that the writer had once been her devoted lover, while the hope that he held out was something she could cling to as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

She then murmured:

"Noble man! he shall indeed be like a brother to me, and I will drown my own grief and be as cheerful as I can."

"Still I cannot believe Cecil Dare guilty as accused, and he has, *he must have a double!*"

With this she descended to the breakfast-room, where her father awaited her, and handed to him Captain Urbana's letter.

He read it slowly, aloud, and said fervently:

"Heaven grant it be as he says, my child; but it is noble in Urbana to offer to hunt the seas to discover the truth for you."

"Noble, indeed, father, and I would not have him go, but wait here in his vessel, for you know Captain Dare was to return here before very long."

"Very true."

"And if he is the true man I believe him, it will then be known, while if he has a double, it will be his duty to hunt him down."

"You are right, Rachel, my child."

"Then urge Captain Urbana to come ashore and become your guest, father, and let his vessel remain here in the harbor."

"And should Dare return and Urbana attempt to capture him?"

"Then I will be the first one, if he is proven guilty, to say to Captain Urbana to do his duty."

"You are a noble girl, Rachel, and it shall be as you say."

"I will go aboard after breakfast, and have Urbana return as my guest."

"And pray, say that I urge it, father, for his noble letter has touched me deeply."

"I will do so, Rachel."

And the Don went on board the *Relentless* after breakfast, to return before noon accompanied by Captain Urbana, who was smiling with joy at his triumph.

"I will win her yet," he muttered to himself as he was shown into the beautiful room which was to be his while he remained Don Ramon's guest.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DEFIANCE.

THE cunning letter written by Captain Almo Urbana made him a most welcome guest at the Ravera Hacienda, and Rachel vied with her father in kind hospitality.

His offer to go at once in search of the *Sea Soldier*, and discover if her commander was really Captain Cecil Dare, or his double, was declined with thanks by the maiden, for after a consultation with her father it was decided that the best chance for Captain Almo Urbana to find the true man was to remain at the hacienda.

If it was her lover, Cecil Dare, he would return to her as he had promised to do, and then

the truth could be discovered, for of course he would be glad to aid in the running down of a man who was pretending to be none other than himself, such a man as the Mexican commander of the brig *Relentless* claimed to have discovered in the American officer who had come to Vera Cruz and behaved so shamefully, not to speak of cowardice.

Captain Urbana was very glad of this arrangement for two reasons.

One was because it would keep him near Rachel Ravera, living an idle life of luxury at the hacienda, with prospects of stepping into the place of the absent American, and the other was the hope that the Sea Soldier would return.

He knew that his brig was heavier by far than the schooner and carried six more guns, with at least forty more men.

Then he would have the advantage of a surprise, for when the schooner came in, not fearing danger, he would be all ready for action, the cables could be slipped and a fire poured upon the schooner at close range that would cripple her badly.

Before she could get her men to quarters and ready for action he would bear down upon her, board, and not one of the crew should be left alive to tell the story that a Mexican brig had sunk an American cruiser, and he would make the claim that it was a buccaner sailing under false colors.

Such was the bold plot of the Mexican captain, and if it did not go as he wished it would not be his fault.

Had the schooner been his equal, or near it, in size, guns and men, he would not have remained in the Hacienda Harbor to await her coming.

He had already had an example of how Cecil Dare could handle himself and he did not doubt but that he could handle his vessel equally well, and in such case he preferred to overweight the American by far.

Going on board his vessel one day, as it was his wont to show himself to his officers and men daily, he found a man there awaiting his coming.

The man's small sail-boat was alongside, and he claimed to have come in it from Vera Cruz.

"Who do you wish to see, my man?"

"Captain Almo Urbana, senior."

"From whence do you come?"

"Vera Cruz, senior."

"Ah! and from whom?"

"I think the letter will explain, senior."

Captain Urbana took the letter and descended to his cabin.

Breaking the seal he read it through carefully after glancing at the heading and date, which showed it to have been written in Vera Cruz some days before.

The letter was as follows:

"CAPTAIN ALMO URBANA,

Commanding Mexican Cruiser Relentless:—

"SENOR:—It having come to our knowledge that you sailed from Vera Cruz directly to the harbor off Don Ramon Ravera's hacienda, and have spent three weeks, basking in the smiles of the fair Senorita Rachel, instead of being at sea cruising, we are constrained to inform you that your capturing of the brig hangs upon our favor toward you, and that you must be off at work, or the investment made in the brig will be a losing one as long as you are in command.

"Your venture at the hacienda may eventually bring gold to your purse, but it certainly will not aid us, and unless you at once put to sea we will see to it that your name is dropped from the Naval Roll of Honor, and you will be thereby forced to fight your way under a flag of our choosing.

"Expecting you to sail at once, and make regular report to us,

"We remain,

"Your obedient servants,

"ESCALON & VALVERDE."

The captain smiled grimly to himself as he read the letter over for the second time.

"They think to control me, do they?"

"Well, they are mistaken in the thought, as I will assure them.

"They threaten to have me outlawed, and thus force me into piracy.

"Fools! do they not know that they have placed in my hands the instrument to win fortune and protect myself?

"I care nothing for them now, for I have the brig, the battery and the crew, and if the Mexican Government does outlaw me, why I have the means of making them repent the act.

"Why, I would, if forced to hoist the black flag, cause a wail to go up along this whole Mexican Coast, and then the beautiful Rachel would indeed find herself the bride of a pirate.

"Now to answer this precious letter," and he hastily wrote as follows:

"SENORS:—As commander of the brig *Relentless*, I understand fully my duties, and were I to be outlawed by the Mexican Government, neither of you need expect to share in my good fortunes.

"The best way is to let me conduct my affairs as best suits myself, for I will not be governed by you.

"Your obedient servant,

"ALMO URBANA,

Captain Mexican Navy."

And this letter of defiance Madras carried back to the two men who had deemed themselves masters of Alma Urbana, as having bought him body and soul.

CHAPTER XLV.

BANKER ESCALON'S RESOLVE.

SENOR ESCALON was not a man to be trifled with and not resent it.

He was a remarkably shrewd, deep villain, and his honorable and dearest friends would have been first to resent any stain upon his character.

For the asking he could have borrowed any sum without the scratch of a pen in return, so great was the confidence of all in him.

His word was gilt edge, and he was considered a model man, for his little play at the Casino now and then was looked upon by the padres as nothing more than innocent enjoyment.

What he could do as a rich and honored man would be considered a crime in one who was poor and friendless.

Senor Escalon gave liberally to the church, his dinners to the padres were regularly timed, and his wines the very best.

Therefore the banker was a pet in society, and the idol of the poor people.

He would not rob a friend, but preferred to get his money from outsiders by any means he could, even if the knife had to fall.

His association with Valverde was not regarded unfavorably, for it was rumored that the rich miner-gambler banked very heavily with Senor Escalon, who invested his moneys for him.

The closest clerk which Escalon had in his employ did not know that his employer was living a double life, and the business of the concern went on with honorable methods, and the only surprise was how the senior could make so much money *outside* of the office, for he was continually adding to his wealth by means which those in the establishment could not understand.

But all was looked upon as legitimate transactions of course.

But these outside *earnings* came from the booty of smugglers which he sold through a store which he owned secretly, and the revenue received from Valverde's robberies, and which was all put into gold through another branch of business which the banker ran in a *sub rosa* way.

Still another venture was the sending of Captain Almo Urbana to sea in the brig.

If that officer turned pirate he, Escalon, of course had nothing to do with it any more than had Valverde.

This venture the banker hoped would reap him a rich harvest, and he was careful to take two-thirds of the stock, when Valverde had one-third.

And right in this transaction the deep cunning of the banker was shown, for on all the money advanced to Captain Urbana on his property, he had had it appraised by men in his employ, unknown to the officer, and just two-thirds of its marketable value was given.

So when he gave the money to buy the brig he was really giving the captain's own gold, while what Senor Valverde put in was just that much given for the banker.

But though the brig had cost him nothing, and was at sea under a captain who was his slave, so to speak, he had no idea of losing anything by the transaction through its not being made.

So he decided, after receiving the captain's letter, and having a talk with Valverde, to go to the Ramon Hacienda himself and have a talk with Captain Urbana.

He would say to the Don that he was looking for a large purchase of cattle, as an excuse for his visit, and he would go by land on horseback.

This Senor Valverde urged him to do, as the quickest and best means of reaching Captain Urbana, and further he told him that he had best take along a large sum in bank bills to purchase cattle, if he found them, as a profit could be made in them just then.

The idea of making a profit pleased the banker, and he decided to follow Valverde's advice, and told him so.

This pleased the gambler-highwayman so much that he gave him full directions as to his course to take, avoiding all chance of meeting trail marauders, and then going to his own quarters at once dispatched a messenger to his lieutenant to be on the watch for the rich banker, Senor Escalon, and clean him out of every *peso* he had in his possession.

It was not that Valverde did not like Escalon, for he did; but he considered this a little piece of legitimate business upon his part, as he was sure that the banker had often doubled on him in money matters.

That day Escalon dined with him and the highwayman did all in his power to make it pleasant for him, and again repeated his advice about the trails to be taken.

"I think I shall go by vehicle, Valverde, with an armed escort of driver, footman and my valet, for the roads are dangerous.

"Then I can carry our saddles and bridles along to change to horseback if need be."

"A good idea, and far safer I assure you, for though I anticipate no peril to you, one can

never tell just when to find a Mexican gentleman of the road.

"Of course the badge I give you will protect you from my men, should any of them be down in the coast country, but there are other trail marauders than Henrico the Highwayman's."

"Doubtless," returned Escalon, and when he had departed Valverde sent another messenger to say that the banker would go by vehicle, with three armed men and carry his badge of protection, but it was not to protect him in that case.

The next day Senor Escalon started upon his trip to the Ravera Hacienda.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A GENTLEMAN OF THE ROAD.

THE banker Escalon loved his comfort, and he traveled in style.

Those who saw his handsome vehicle going along the road supposed it was the turnout of some very distinguished personage, and as a matter of fact it was, for Senor Escalon was a very widely known man.

His carriage was a comfortable one, softly cushioned, and he could stretch himself at ease in it.

He had his luncheon, coffee-pot to make coffee by the wayside, his wines and all to add to his comfort.

Then he had an expert driver holding the reins over four splendid horses.

By his side sat a servant, acting as man-of-all-work, and in the vehicle upon the front seat was the banker's valet.

Behind, in lead, trotted two saddle-horses, and the boot contained a pack-saddle and others so that in case of need they could all mount and away.

There were a couple of rifles swinging in the carriage, fishing-rods, and the three servants were well armed.

So it was that the banker went prepared against emergencies.

The first night's halt was made at a pleasant hacienda, and the ranchero warned Senor Escalon to beware of Henrico's Highwaymen who were abroad in the land.

The next night's halt was to camp, the banker sleeping in the carriage the three servants upon their *serapes* under it, with a camping-out supper and breakfast.

But Senor Escalon rather enjoyed the novelty of the affair.

At noon the next day a halt was made, and the Ravera Hacienda would be reached by night.

Banker Escalon was enjoying his mid-day lunch, and his men were preparing theirs, while the horses, unbitched from the traveling carriage, were staked out near.

Suddenly, as though cut of the ground, on four sides, approached eight men.

It was a case of two to one, with odds in favor of a surprise, and those who appeared had their guns at a level upon the four, who were so interested in edibles just then as to be caught napping.

Out of a thicket there rose a man on horseback, dressed very gorgeously, but wearing a mask.

He held a pistol in his hand, and said in a suave way:

"I am the toll-gatherer of this highway, and would feel obliged if you will have the kindness to hand over your fare."

Nothing could have been more polite, and Senor Escalon was equally so, for he bowed and responded:

"I have a badge of protection here from gatherers of toll," and he revealed a seal-ring which he wore, with a large black stone, in which was set a skull and cross-bones in pearls.

"Yes, I know the badge as that of Henrico the Highwayman, but his protection does not extend so near the coast, senior, and you must pay me my price, if you please."

He was so polite that Senor Escalon was tempted to say:

"But suppose I do not please to do so?"

"It is a matter of utter indifference to me, senior, whether you hand over your money or I take it from your body after death."

"It is for you to take your choice."

This was a very decided way of expressing it; yet the robber did not lose his pleasant, polite manner, and it struck Senor Escalon that he would cut a throat in the same gentlemanly way.

"Very well, name your price," he said angrily.

"You must be a man of vast riches to travel in such style."

"That has nothing to do with the case."

"Oh, yes it has, begging your pardon, for I never rob a poor man, give the padres a discount on account of their calling, have one in good circumstances pay well and force a rich man to hand over most generously."

"Now you are rich."

"I am not a poor man, but name your sum."

"Well, senior, you will pardon me if I search your carriage first, and then your servants, after which I will expect you to take your turn."

"There is no need of a search, for I have my

money here with me, and it is a considerable sum, for I am going to buy cattle on the coast."

"Ah! then I am happy in having made your acquaintance. About how much have you with you, senor?"

"Some thirty thousand pesos, and I will give you one-third."

"What is the matter with the other two-thirds, senor?"

"I need that for myself."

"We are strangely alike in that particular, and as you are rich, I a poor gentleman of the road, I will just ask you to hand over your thirty thousand pesos."

"You will ruin me!"

"No, senor, you know where to get more, and traveling as you are I know that you have a thousand in loose change for expenses, and that I will not take."

"You are very kind," sneered the banker.

"Don't mention it, I beg of you, senor, for I am too modest to like to hear my praises sung."

"Your money, please."

With a groan Senor Escalon drew out half a dozen sealed envelopes, bearing a bank stamp, and the value of the bills within each one.

He opened one and asked:

"Can I not have half of this sum, senor?"

"No, senor, nothing more than your change."

"You will ruin me!"

"No, I hope not; but I thank you, senor, and the money is so nicely put up."

"I have the honor of saying good-day, senor," and thrusting the packages in his pocket, he rode away, his men disappearing as silently as they had come.

CHAPTER XLVII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"QUICK, Mendez, get your horses hitched up, and put them on a pace that will take us far from here in a very short while."

This order fairly startled the three servants of Senor Escalon, two minutes after the gentleman of the road and his men had departed.

The servants were surprised, but sprung to obey the command, wondering what their master's haste could be after he had been robbed of a large fortune, for to them thirty thousand pesos was an enormous sum.

Quickly the horses were harnessed, and the vehicle rolled away upon its journey at a very rapid pace.

The animals were surprised at having been urged so suddenly out of their traveling gait, but the crack of the whip kept them going.

After having been pressed for a couple of hours, they came to the top of a long hill which commanded a stretch of five miles of the road behind them.

There Senor Escalon leaned out of the window and glanced back.

Quickly he called out:

"They are coming, Mendez, and we will all be murdered."

"Drive at full speed down the hill and then halt, for we will take to the saddle."

Down the hill for a mile the vehicle rushed, and then came to a sudden halt on the bank of a small brook.

Senor Escalon sprung out and his own and his valet's horses were quickly saddled and bridled.

Two of the other horses were also quickly saddled and bridled, and packs put upon the two remaining animals.

Into these packs were quickly strapped the luggage and traps taken from the carriage and all had not taken fifteen minutes to accomplish.

"Our horses have had a rest, and here is a stream to water them."

"Now set the carriage on fire and we will be off."

The match was applied to the silk curtains and cushions, and they blazed up like tinder.

Then the party mounted and rode into the brook to water their horses.

Just as they started a party of a dozen horsemen appeared upon the top of the hill three-quarters of a mile away.

In the lead was the gorgeously dressed gentleman of the road who had been so polite in his robbery of Senor Escalon.

"Now it's a race for life," cried the banker, and he led in the race.

Away they went at a swift, sweeping gallop, and they soon had the satisfaction of seeing that they were at least holding their own against their pursuers.

"Why should they follow us, senor, when you gave them a fortune?"

"Caramba! it was more than a poor man earns in a lifetime," said Suzol the valet.

"It is because I did not give them thirty thousand pesos, Suzol, that they seek my life."

"But, senor, you handed him the envelopes of bank-notes, crisp and beautiful."

"Yes, Suzol, and they were not worth a peso."

"Ah, senor!"

"It was bank-note paper, finished like money, but all bogus, as an examination revealed to them."

"It would have passed with an ignorant man,

Suzol, but that gentleman of the road was no fool, and when he sat down to see if the Bank of Mexico, in envelopes of which I had put the pretended notes, had made any mistake in its count, he saw that he had been fooled."

"So he called together his fellow cut-throats, Suzol, and there they come, and it strikes me they are gaining a trifle upon us."

"They are, senor, but it is because we were all listening to your story of how you got the better of the robbers."

"Yes, but this is our secret, my men, for I deceived the robbers."

"Let the people think that Banker Escalon was really robbed of thirty thousand pesos, and does not mind the loss; but I told you to show you that we have to make a hard run for it, and perhaps a fight, so do not let them catch us, for they will hang you three certain, while they will keep me for ransom—do you see?"

The three servants did see, and they showed their appreciation of the fact by making better speed at once.

The result of this was that the robbers began to drop behind once more, when in the last half-hour they had gained perceptibly.

So the chase went on until the horses were white with foam, and staggering with fatigue.

But the pursuers' animals were in even worse shape, and they had lost nearly half a mile also.

At last they gave up the chase, and Senor Escalon came to a slow pace with his men and went along for miles at a walk.

Then a halt was made for rest, and when the start was made again they were told by a *vaquero* they met that Hacienda Ravera was but a league distant.

An hour before sunset they rode up to the wall of the hacienda and Don Ramon came to greet his visitor.

He knew Senor Escalon well, and cordially welcomed him, and listened with interest to the story of his being held up on the road and the chase that followed.

When left alone in his room, which commanded a view of the harbor, Senor Escalon glanced from his window and said aloud:

"He is still here, for there lies his vessel at anchor."

"I was wise to come."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE FIRST CRUISE.

CAPTAIN ALMO URBANA was not at the hacienda when Senor Luis Escalon and his servants arrived.

He was on board of his vessel, but had simply gone there as was his daily custom to have an eye upon his crew.

But he was to return to dine at the hacienda, and when Senor Escalon descended to the library he found there Rachel and her father.

The latter was standing by the open window and remarked, as Senor Escalon came into the room:

"His boat is putting off now, Rachel."

Then the Don turned, greeted his guest and presented his daughter, for she had never met Senor Escalon.

She greeted him pleasantly as a friend of her father, and yet the keen eyes of Escalon saw that she looked like one who was not happy.

"We are so fortunate as to have Captain Almo Urbana with us, Senor Escalon, as our guest, his vessel being at anchor in my harbor, so you will meet an old friend, I believe."

"Yes, it will be a pleasant surprise, and I was rejoiced to recognize the Relentless in your port," returned Escalon.

Soon after Captain Urbana entered the room with the air of a man who felt perfectly at home.

He started at sight of Escalon, half drew back and turned pale; but the banker quickly came to his relief by stepping forward and grasping his hand, while he said:

"What an unexpected pleasure this, meeting you, Urbana."

"Yes, I was positively startled—wondered if you were dead and it was your apparition I beheld, for you never trust yourself so far from home, I believe, Senor Escalon."

"Not often, for a run to the City of Mexico by coach is my greatest journeying nowadays."

"But I have ventured here on a large cattle purchase, and really am delighted to run across you."

Captain Urbana inwardly cursed the banker for coming, though his face indicated pleasure, and soon after they went in to the large dining hall.

All through the meal the keen eyes of Escalon took in the situation, that Almo Urbana was trying to show him how thoroughly at home he was with the Don and his daughter, and imply that there was something beneath the surface between the senorita and himself.

But Escalon was a close reader of human nature, and though the Don treated Captain Urbana with marked courtesy, he could see that the manner of Rachel Ravera was distant, that her thoughts were far away at times, and the same look of haunting sadness which he had first noticed clung to her beautiful face.

She was kind toward the Mexican captain and that was all.

It was impossible for the banker to get a show to speak with Captain Urbana that night, but he asked to go on board the brig the next day in a manner that could not be refused, and soon after breakfast a boat was hailed and the two went out to the vessel.

"Be seated, please," said Urbana, as the two entered the cabin of the Relentless.

"Thanks, yes, and sit down yourself, for I wish a talk with you."

"And permit me to suggest it would be well to see that there are no eavesdroppers about."

Almo Urbana's face flushed, and he saw that there was no one about, and then threw himself into a chair opposite the banker, with the look of a man who felt that there was an ordeal before him.

"Well, captain, what does it mean, may I ask, that you are not on a cruise?" and Banker Escalon's manner was cool and confident, like one who held winning cards and was waiting for the play of his adversary.

"I can do better by remaining in port for the present."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"In what respect?"

"Well, I am in a fair way to wed the Senorita Ravera."

"Ah! and her American lover?"

"See here, Escalon, we are in this matter to sink or swim together, and you should have let me manage my own affairs in my own way."

"What have you at stake?"

"A fortune."

"To get, yes."

"Well?"

"I have one invested in this brig, and you hold command by my will alone."

"I wish to say to you that I came here to see what my chances were with the Senorita Ravera, and the result I will tell you."

He then made known how he had defamed Captain Cecil Dare, and that he was merely awaiting his return to the port to wipe his vessel and crew out of existence, pretending to believe the craft a pirate.

Escalon listened attentively and then said:

"My dear Urbana, you have overshot the mark."

"The Sea Soldier is on a special duty in the Gulf, and her captain has been ordered to hunt down all pirates, and he has rendered splendid service in that work."

"To sink his vessel, if you could do so, which I frankly admit I doubt, in spite of your strength, would involve our little country in a war that would be ruinous, for it would soon be proven that the Sea Soldier was no pirate."

"You might get rid of a rival, it is true; but that would not be the end of it, and I therefore say that you must start upon your cruise at once, and should you come across the schooner in the night, why sink him."

"If you do not obey my wish, why I shall simply claim my vessel and place her in other hands, while I will let it be known just how she was given to you to command."

"What do you propose doing, Captain Urbana?"

The captain bit his lips angrily but answered: "I propose to go upon a cruise, and then wed the Senorita Ravera."

"My dear Urbana, the senorita thinks more of her American lover, pirate though you call him, than she does of you, believing you are an honest man."

"She will never marry you."

"By Heaven, but she shall!" was the savage response.

"We shall see," was the quiet response of Senor Escalon, as he arose to take his leave.

"Yes, I vow it."

"Vows are made of words only, Urbana; but, when do you sail?"

"To-morrow."

"And see that you capture a pirate or two, for the gulf is thick with them."

"When do you leave the hacienda, Escalon?"

"When your brig is out of sight seaward."

"Caramba!" came in a hiss from the lips of the Mexican sailor.

"Oh, I do not intend to make love to the senorita, though no man could do better."

"I shall praise you to the skies, for your winning is my gain, only I do not believe you can do so."

"Now we will go ashore," and they did so.

The next morning the Relentless had started upon her first cruise, Captain Urbana telling the Don that Senor Escalon had told him of several pirate craft having been lately seen down the coast.

And the following morning Senor Escalon departed upon his return to Vera Cruz, being very careful to take a trail back which would not lead him near the gentleman of the road whom he had so cleverly deceived.

CHAPTER XLIX.

DOUBTED.

"WELL, Rachel, I am glad to see that you have been quite cheerful of late, and I hope that you will keep up your spirits now that my guests have gone."

So said Don Ramon after the departure of Senor Escalon from the hacienda.

"I shall not afflict my sorrow upon you, father; but my cheerful mood has been forced, I am compelled to admit, for my heart has been full of sadness."

"You have cause, my poor child, if you have loved one who is so utterly unworthy of you as at present it seems that Captain Dare has proven himself."

"He is not unworthy, father."

"But how about Urbana's report, and you also heard what Senor Escalon had to say about the scene in the Casino, and afterward the duel."

"Yes, father."

"Escalon of course did not know that Dare was aught to you, or he would not have spoken as he did."

"Then you are convinced that Captain Dare is all that he has been painted, father?"

"How can I believe anything else in the face of facts?"

"I cling to the idea that he has a double."

"It may be so, and that you met the honest man and they the villain. I only hope that such is the case, my child."

"As I do, sir; but, father, what did Senor Escalon come here for?"

"He was on a search for cattle."

"Did he purchase any?"

"A few hundred."

"Is it not strange that a man of his wealth should risk his life coming here to buy a few cattle?"

"I was surprised at it."

"He has a vast banking business, too?"

"Yes."

"Did he pay you, father?"

"Oh, yes, my price, in gold."

"Yet he told me he had been robbed of thirty thousand pesos on the way here, and been compelled to desert his carriage."

"Yes, that is so."

"Father."

"Well, Rachel."

"I'll tell you what Senor Escalon came here for."

"Yes?"

"He came to see Captain Urbana."

"Nonsense, child."

"I am sure of it."

"No, my child, it was a perfect surprise to them both to meet here."

"You did not see what I did, father."

"What did you see?"

"I saw Captain Urbana turn deathly white at beholding Senor Escalon here, and I saw several signs pass between them."

"Your imagination, my child."

"No, father, Senor Escalon came here especially to see Captain Urbana, I am firmly convinced."

"The next day they had an interview on board the brig, and the following morning the Relentless sailed, after Captain Urbana had faithfully promised me he would remain here and await the return of the Sea Soldier."

"He left on account of having heard through Escalon that pirates were marauding down the coast."

"I cannot think so, father."

"Don't you like Escalon, Rachel?"

"I do, and I do not, father."

"He has very courtly manners, and—"

"Yes, to all appearances he is a finished gentleman; but I believe I can read between the lines in a man's character, and if Senor Escalon is not a wicked man at heart I am very sorry to wrong him with a thought."

"You do so, I am sure, and I fear you will have the same opinion of Captain Urbana."

"Perhaps I may."

"You surely like Urbana?"

"I will answer you as in the other case, father, I do and I do not."

"He is a splendid fellow."

"Yes, sir, a dashing officer, a generous-hearted man he seems."

"Rich, and spends his money freely, while until he received that scar I thought him the handsomest man in the service."

"Yes, it terribly disfigures him, father; but I do not believe that he is wholly to be trusted."

"Ah, my child, you are seeing all men now through clouded eyes."

"The man you loved has dropped from a hero to a villain and a coward, and you certainly cannot believe in the honest nature of others, after his fall."

"I believe as wholly in the honor of Cecil Dare, father, as I do in yours, and that is saying very much, for you are my *beau ideal* of perfect manhood."

"I do not believe that the man whom Captain Urbana and Senor Escalon refer to as a villain and a coward to be Cecil Dare, the man whom I love far more than I do my life."

"I doubt them, yes, and I would doubt even you, father, before I would the man whose wife I promised one day to become."

"Well, Rachel, from my inmost soul I hope your beautiful trust will be fully realized some day."

"If Cecil Dare is the honest man you deem him, then he will come here some day and clear his name of the shame upon it."

"If not, you may be sure that he will be run to earth in good time, and he will deserve the worst of punishments for his crimes, while you, my child, and I can never be too thankful for your escape from the doom of becoming a pirate's wife."

"Yes, father, and to my dying day I will never utter a prayer without asking Heaven to guide Almo Urbana's path through life."

"Poor fellow, he loves you desperately, and yet seemed not to wish to give you pain by one word to cause you to think so; but he did say to me that if your lover was proven unworthy, that he would some day ask you to let him make you his wife, that he would be content with the second place in your heart."

"Ah, father, if Cecil Dare is proven other than I believe him, then never will I be the wife of any man."

"I will devote my life to you, and when I die my fortune to charity, for I am not one to love twice. I cannot love two men, though friendships I may have by the score."

"Do you think, if you should die, my dear, noble father, that I could find another man to take your place, that I could call another by the sacred name of father?"

"Could another woman be to me a mother, and could I feel that another could fill the place in my heart that my mother did?"

"So it is with my love for one who held no claim upon me from kindred ties, but won my heart by his noble nature, his manhood, and risking his life to save me."

"Can he be proven false, treacherous, wicked, would I trust another, love another as I have Cecil Dare?"

"No, a thousand times no, and until I know him to be all it is said he is, will I revere and love him."

The Don turned away, his heart full; but he murmured to himself:

"Poor Urbana, he will never win her, never!"

CHAPTER L.

UNWELCOME NEWS.

We left the Sea Soldier on the way to New Orleans under full sail, to discover if the *goleta* was still there, for after what Clover had told Captain Cecil Dare of the secret treasure closet on board he was most anxious to search the pirate vessel before she should be sold.

He told Lieutenant Orville to crowd on all sail to reach port, and informed him confidentially of the cause of his great haste.

As he would come in for a goodly share of the prize money, if the *goleta* was found to be unsold, Lieutenant Orville astonished the under officers and crew by the manner in which he drove the schooner on her way, though to the credit of the senior lieutenant I should say that he was just as anxious to do his duty as he was to win a golden share in the outlaw treasure.

On drove the Sea Soldier, and the wind held her fair until the low shores about the mouth of the Mississippi were sighted.

It was night when the schooner dropped anchor in the mouth of the river, Captain Dare not caring to risk a run up in the darkness, and knowing that if the *goleta* was not already sold and gone, she would still be in port and no vessel could pass out without being seen from on board and reported.

The next morning the schooner got up anchor and moved slowly up the river against the current.

The wind freshened, and night came again just as the lights of the Crescent City loomed up ahead.

The anchor was soon after let fall, and ordering a boat lowered, Captain Dare entered it, accompanied by Clover, and rowed away toward the town.

Clover had become universally popular on the schooner, during the run.

From Lieutenant Orville to the powder-monkey he was liked, though at first he was looked upon with envy because, not holding any rank, he was taken into the cabin with the captain, to serve at his table.

But all prejudice the youth soon silenced, and all liked him immensely.

He was courteous, and controlling his mischievous nature, he treated no one with disrespect, while he was always anxious to take a trick at duty, and had gone aloft in a blow when few men cared to risk it.

Danger he defied, and he had proven himself a sailor of no ordinary caliber.

Possessing a sweet, pathetic tenor voice he charmed the crew with his music, for he had brought a Spanish guitar aboard with him, and he had found time to write half a hundred letters for the men, to their mothers, wives and sweethearts, to be mailed upon arrival in New Orleans.

The officers felt that there was something back of the mere want of a clerk, or secretary, which drew Captain Dare toward the handsome lad, but they did not question too closely, and Clover was not one to get any information out of which he was not perfectly willing to make known.

So when the captain took the lad at once ashore with him upon arrival of the schooner in the port of New Orleans, the middies were cer-

tain that the mysterious youth had something to do with the rapid run from Vera Cruz.

Arriving at the shore the captain dismissed the boat with orders to the coxswain to be on hand at a certain hour in the morning, and then wended his way, with Clover, toward the Hotel St. Luis.

It was too late to call upon the agents, so after a good supper, the two went to the theater, and enjoyed the evening, Captain Dare having discarded his uniform for a civilian's suit to come ashore in.

Bright and early the two were at the office of the agents, with whom Lieutenant Orville had left the *goleta* for sale, and asking to see Mr. Newman, they were shown into that gentleman's private office.

"Mr. Newman, I am Captain Cecil Dare of the United States schooner-of-war Sea Soldier."

"Ah, Captain Dare, I am delighted to see you, sir, and yet I have no very pleasant news for you," said Mr. Newman, and he motioned the visitors to seats.

"I have come, sir, to ascertain if you have yet sold the *goleta* left in your hands by my lieutenant, Mr. Orville?"

"That is just the bad news I have to tell you, sir, or at least bad for me, for I of course will hand you the amount of the schooner's value."

"Then you have sold her?" quickly asked Cecil Dare.

Mr. Newman looked a trifle confused, and before answering rung a bell on his desk.

An office-boy appeared, and the agent said:

"Ask Mr. Quill to write out, payable to Captain Cecil Dare, U. S. Navy, a check on my bankers for five thousand dollars and bring it to me."

"Yes, sir," and the boy disappeared, while Cecil Dare again said anxiously:

"Then you have sold the *goleta*, sir?"

"I have and I haven't, Captain Dare."

"I do not understand your paradoxical words, Mr. Newman."

"One minute, sir, and I will explain— Ah! here is the check, so, Captain Dare, there is the value you placed upon the prize."

"Then she is sold?"

"Captain Dare, I did, as I believed, sell the *goleta*, to a gentleman who represented himself as a wealthy coast planter."

"He gave me his draft on the bank here, and the next day when I sent it in for collection it was dishonored; and the *goleta* had set sail during the night, but I stand the loss, sir, and there is your check for the sum your lieutenant placed upon her."

"Keep your check, Mr. Newman, for it is the *goleta* I want, not the money," was the startling response of Cecil Dare.

CHAPTER LI.

THE STRANGER.

The unwelcome news told to Cecil Dare by Mr. Newman caused him to spring to his feet in considerable excitement, and the agent asked quickly:

"Was it not your wish to sell the vessel, sir, for I had no other orders to the contrary?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Newman, it was my wish, and yet I hoped to arrive here before you did sell the vessel."

"The truth is that she is worth far more than at a glance appears, as she has a secret treasure closet on board which was not found by us when we captured her."

"My dear sir, you amaze me, and I regret exceedingly that such a loss has occurred through me."

"You are not to blame in the matter, my dear sir, for you but obeyed your orders, and I only regret that you accepted a check that was worthless."

"My young friend here happened to be a prisoner to the pirate whose vessel the *goleta* was, and he discovered that Lamonte had this secret closet to which I refer."

"As we knew nothing of it, and Lamonte escaped, we did not find the treasure and so he, no one else, was the bogus purchaser of the craft."

"There can be no doubt of that, Captain Dare, when we know that his check was of no account."

"I will tell you, sir, all about it, and you can judge for yourself."

"I shall be glad to hear your story, Mr. Newman, but first tell me when the *goleta* sailed?"

"Night before last, sir."

"Ha! so late as that was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had we reached here twelve hours sooner we would have headed him off."

"Yes, and I only wish that you could have done so, Captain Dare."

"As I do, sir, but let me know all you have to tell and then I will go in the wake of the pirate."

"And may you catch him, for I would lose the five thousand dollars with pleasure to see you hang him," earnestly said the agent.

"That will surely be his fate if I do catch him, Mr. Newman."

"He came here three days ago and was ushered into this office to await my coming."

"A more courtly gentleman I never met, and his voice was so pleasantly toned that I enjoyed hearing him talk.

"He told me that his name was Montefeno, and that he was a planter on the Alabama Coast, not far from Mobile, and wished a vessel for pleasure and work both, asking me if I had such a craft.

"I at once suggested the *goleta*, telling him that she had been a pirate under the Rover of the Lagoons, but he said that he was afraid ill fortune would befall him if he took a vessel with such a crime-stained record.

"So I spoke of others I had for sale, and we went to the river to see them.

"We had visited several of their anchorages, none of which suited him, when he spied the *goleta* at her anchorage.

"Ah! there is a beautiful vessel, sir, and I only wish you had her on your list for sale, he said, with enthusiasm.

"I told him that I had the craft on my list, and we were rowed aboard.

"He said she was in a wretched condition, for you know she needed repairs badly, and yet asked her price.

"I told him, and he at once asked if a couple of thousand would not put her in good trim?

"I told him that twenty-five hundred, at furthest, would make her as good as new, and a beautiful vessel, and he told me that he would take her, and give me a check on his bankers for seven thousand five hundred, and that I was to put her in perfect trim for him.

"Then it was that I told him that it was the pirate craft, and the news seemed to stun him a little.

"But he went over the craft again, sounded the timbers, and said that he would drop prejudice and take the craft, for it just suited him in every respect.

"He hastily sketched out his plan of improvements, and here they are," and Mr. Newman handed over a paper upon which, written in a bold hand, were a number of specifications for the improvement of the vessel.

"We returned to the office and he took out a couple of check-books, and asked if I would prefer a check upon his Mobile bankers, Brewer & Company, or New Orleans, for he could go around to the latter and hand me the money if I desired.

"I looked at my watch and told him that it was after banking hours, so to give me the check, which he did.

"Then he told me, as there was a good wind and he had the crew of his plantation craft with him, with my permission he would put them on board and take a short sail to see how the *goleta* handled.

"Of course I did not object, and promising to call on the morrow he departed.

"The next morning one of my men told me that a lubberly little craft was anchored where the *goleta* had been and I hastened down to see her.

"She was a leaky, good-for-nothing coaster, with not ten dollars' worth of furniture in her, and in dismay I hastened to the bank with my check, and found that no such a person as Planter Montefeno had an account there, nor was such a person known to them.

"Then I knew that the *goleta* had been stolen from me! but that man could not have been the pirate himself."

"Describe him, please, sir," said Clover.

Mr. Newman did so, and Clover said:

"Yes, sir, that man was Lamonte, the Lagoon Rover."

CHAPTER LII.

THE PURSUIT.

THE story told by the shipping-agent had been listened to with the deepest interest both by Captain Dare and Clover.

The latter could not have told, in the moment he got a glimpse of the Rover on board his *goleta*, at the time of the attack, whether it was he or some one else who had purchased the vessel, or rather defrauded the agent out of her; but Clover knew him well and the description given he at once recognized as that of Lamonte.

"He left his schooner down on the coast, captured some poor coaster, and with a few men of his crew came up to the city after the *goleta*."

"If he had not gotten her from you, sir, as he did, he would have cut her out," said Clover, and Cecil Dare at once rejoined:

"You are right, I am sure, Clover; but now, Mr. Newman, can you tell me just what start he has of me?"

"I should judge, sir, that he went at once down the river, when pretending to try the sailing qualities of the *goleta*, and so he is all of thirty-six hours ahead of you, sir."

"Well, there are some stores that I need, and it will be several hours before I can get off; but I shall retake the *goleta*, sir, and I hope the other vessel of the Rover also, for it belongs to a Mexican gentleman who is a friend of mine."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant Orville told me of your gallant capture of the *goleta*, and the pirates' escape and daring seizure of the Mexican Don's yacht; but let me now see how I can serve you in

getting your stores," said the agent, and he led the way from the office.

Three hours after the Sea Soldier got up anchor and set sail from the fort.

The wind was ahead, so that she had to beat down the river, but she made rapid progress and ran on until night, when she anchored until morning.

Then she continued on her way and soon after ran out of the murky waters of the Mississippi into the clear blue of the Gulf of Mexico.

"Which course shall I put her on, sir?" asked Lieutenant Orville, entering the cabin where Cecil Dare sat.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Orville, hold her as she is until I come on deck, and have Clover sent to me, please."

The lieutenant went on deck and soon Clover entered the cabin.

"Clover, Lieutenant Orville just asked me what course to put the schooner on?"

"Yes, sir."

"I told him to wait until I came on deck."

"Yes, sir."

"Then I sent for you."

"I am here, sir."

"So I see, and I wish to ask your advice, Clover."

"My advice, Captain Dare?"

"Yes, that is what I said."

"What could I do, sir, to advise you?"

"Tell me which course to put the schooner on."

"I tell you, sir?"

"Yes."

"It is for you to say, Captain Dare."

"Then I disagree with you, Clover, for I am in pursuit of Lamonte, the Red Rover of the Gulf, and I desire to know which course to pursue to come up with him?"

"Ah, I understand now, sir."

"Then tell me."

"I believe, Captain Dare, that Lamonte has gone at once to the retreat in the lagoons, or he has at least sent the *goleta* there."

"That is my idea."

"If the time of my pledge was up, sir, the one I made to Felice, the Rover Queen, I would pilot your vessel there, sir, and some day I will do so."

"But you cannot do so now?"

"No, sir."

"Then we must lose the treasure?"

"No, sir; for the *goleta* will be doubtless laid up for repairs, for at the stronghold there is a tramway to haul the vessel out on, and in the band are some first-class ship's carpenters."

"If Captain Lamonte had not wished to get possession of the *goleta* herself, he would have secured the treasure and left her."

"So I believe."

"So he will take her to the stronghold for repairs, and as no one knows the secret of the treasure-closet, it will not be discovered."

"And will he stay there meanwhile?"

"I think not, sir, for a couple of days are as long as he stays there at one time."

"Then he would go upon a cruise, you think?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet first go to the stronghold?"

"Yes, sir."

"We are forty-eight hours behind him?"

"About that, sir."

"In the condition that the *goleta* is he would hardly drive her too hard?"

"I think not, sir."

"Then by driving hard with the schooner we could overtake him?"

"Captain Dare," said Clover, thoughtfully.

"Yes, my boy."

"You asked my advice, and I'll tell you what I will do."

"I am all attention."

"I will not betray the pretty pirate girl, Felice, but I will tell you a course to steer which will bring you near the retreat."

"By laying off-shore, barely in sight, the Sea Arrow can be sighted when she comes out of the lagoons, and you can give chase."

"I understand, my boy."

"If you overhaul the craft, then I will still not have broken my pledge, and then, when the time is up, I will pilot you to the stronghold, and you can run in in the pirate craft itself, so as to give a complete surprise, and by day, but I must make terms for the Pirate Queen and her mother."

"All you ask for them I will grant, Clover."

"Thank you, sir, and if you will now come on deck, I will give you your course," said the youth with a smile.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE CHASE.

THE appearance of the youth on deck, along with the captain, convinced the officers and crew the more that Clover knew more about matters and things in general than they had suspected.

They heard him tell the captain to lay his course for a certain point on the Mexican Coast, and then Clover suggested that a vessel standing in toward the Balize, and evidently coming

from the direction the schooner was to take, should be hailed and questioned.

The schooner was at once put away to head off the strange sail, which was a large barque, and a shot fired over her brought her to a very prompt.

As the schooner neared her under shortened sail, Cecil Dare himself hailed:

"Aho! the barque!"

"Ho, the schooner-of-war!" came the response.

"Have you come across two lateen-rigged craft within the past forty-eight hours?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"When and where?"

"Thirty hours ago, sir, heading southward."

"One of the vessels gave chase and opened fire, but we had a stiff breeze and all sail set, so she gave it up after an hour and stood on after the other craft."

"Ay, ay, sir, and I thank you, with regret at delaying you."

"You are welcome, sir, and let me tell you that one of the vessels showed no colors, but the other had up a red flag."

"Ay, ay, they are the craft we seek—good-day."

The schooner was then crowded with sail and went flying on her course at a terrific speed.

"Only thirty hours ahead of us, Clover."

"Yes, sir, the *goleta* had to run where Lamonte had left his other vessel when he ran up to the town, so we gained on him."

"Yes, and at the pace that the Sea Soldier is now going we will gain two to one on them."

"I wish you could come up with them before they reach the lagoons, sir."

"I only wish that we could," was the reply.

Night came on soon after, and the wind increased in strength until it keeled the schooner well over and sent her tearing along like a frightened thing of life.

She had all set that would draw, and the crew were now all anxiety, for they knew that their captain was on the track of the Red Rover of the Gulf, and with chances of coming up with him.

"But what was the other craft, they wondered, for no one could answer their question who would vouchsafe any answer."

At last they surmised that the *goleta* had been cut out of her anchorage at New Orleans by the Red Rover and unless she was retaken they would lose their share of prize money which her sale would have brought them.

It was on the evening of the tenth day after that the schooner was cruising slowly along the Mexican Coast, some two leagues off-shore.

A calm of several days and baffling winds had followed her good start, and Captain Dare was becoming most anxious about the delay, for he feared now there was no chance of coming up with the two lateen rigs.

"Sail ho!" suddenly came from aloft, and Cecil Dare hastened on deck, to find Clover surveying some object through his glass.

"What do you make her out, Clover?" asked Cecil Dare as the youth stepped toward him.

"I make her a lateen-rigged craft, sir, and her sails are rather new."

"Is it the pirate *goleta*?"

"Not the one that he cut out, sir."

"Then it is the yacht he robbed Don Ramon of?"

"I think so, sir, but I never saw that craft, you know."

"True, but which way does the stranger head?"

"She is creeping along shore, sir, evidently having sighted you, and is trying to keep hidden."

"Then it would be well to pretend not to see her, go about on another tack and stand seaward?"

"Yes, sir, for if you chased her now she could readily find a hiding-place among the lagoons."

The order was at once given to put the schooner upon the port tack, and away she went bowling swiftly along and leaving the land astern.

A run of half an hour revealed the fact that the stranger was also running out from under the land, yet still trying not to be seen, having recognized that the schooner was armed.

As night drew on Clover approached the captain and said, with a polite salute:

"May I offer a suggestion, sir?"

"Certainly, out with it."

"The stranger is on the same tack you are, sir, and if she holds on as she is and you were to anchor, she would pass within a mile of you."

"So she would, Clover."

"Well, sir, these Gulf pirates have a hiding-dodge that you might try as soon as it is dark."

"What is it, Clover?"

"The craft astern, sir, will doubtless suppose you hold straight on your course, and if you suddenly strip the schooner to bare poles after nightfall, and lay quiet upon the waters, you will hardly be seen, at least not until you are very near and the *goleta* gets within good range."

"Then you can open fire, sir, and see how your speed compares with hers."

"Clover, you always hold a trump card and know how to play it and when."

"I will follow your advice to the letter and

only hope that the *goleta* will follow so closely in our wake as to run upon us before we are seen."

"I hope so, sir, and if so Lamonte's days are numbered."

The orders were accordingly given, and soon as the night fell upon the sea, shutting out all within a mile's vision, the schooner was stripped of every bit of canvas, and lay upon the waters silent, dark, and with the crew expectant.

An hour passed, and just as many thought the commander of the *goleta* had changed her course, there came into sight, not a mile distant, the lateen-rigged craft which Clover's ruse had brought so near.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE BANKER'S RETURN.

SEÑOR ESCALON returned in safety to the city, and reported his arrival to his friend Señor Valverde by a note, requesting him to drive with him that day.

But the messenger returned with the response that Señor Valverde had gone to his mines some time before had had not returned.

Escalon smiled blandly and went to his office to get rid of business accumulating during his absence.

But Señor Escalon was a perfect manager, and all about his office went on like clock-work.

He had a clerk for every important department, and two general supervisors, so that he had only to glance at statements to see that all was correct.

A couple of hours each day were sufficient for him, as the head, to look to his affairs and no one could ever deceive him, so that the clerks were thorough in all they did.

He paid them well, did not overwork them, always had a present for each man on his birthday and Christmas, and never scolded, but dismissed for neglect of duty.

His household was conducted upon the same plan, and the clerks and servants of Señor Escalon were noted throughout the town for their devotion to their employer and his interests.

It has already been hinted that Señor Escalon had other business than his bank.

He was the proprietor of a loan shop, and also had an establishment where he dealt in second-hand things, as well as a store where he sold all kinds of goods.

Not one of these establishments knew that Señor Escalon was the proprietor.

The señor was a man of cunning devices, and his loan agency was conducted by a man who was supposed to be the proprietor, but he was simply manager for Escalon, and he did not know that the wealthy old white-haired, white-bearded man who came in each week at night to look over his books, was the famous banker in disguise.

So it was in the second-hand shop and the store, where pirate booty and smuggled goods were secretly sold, the Señor Escalon had his disguises so as not to be known even to the managers of his establishments.

The smuggler captain who ran goods in never saw Señor Escalon as he really was, and knew not who he was, always dealing with the manager of the shop.

So it was that only Captain Almo Urbana and Señor Valverde, alias Henrico, the Highwayman, knew him as he was.

And they simply knew that the famous banker was not the virtuous man he was painted, that he had stooped to cheat at cards and to plot against Cecil Dare, while he took the plunder of the one as a gentleman of the road and had arranged to receive the booty of the other as a pirate.

It may therefore be understood that Señor Escalon lived under no axe he expected to fall and crush him, but took life serenely.

He was not afraid of Alma Urbana or Valverde, and no one else could say aught against him.

Having attended to his business affairs at the office, and seen that nothing had suffered through his week's absence, he dropped in at the club to meet his army and navy friends, nearly all whom he held the paper of for loans, and then took a ride for exercise, in spite of his having just returned from a long jaunt on horseback.

He ate his dinner alone, and enjoyed it, for the Señor Escalon enjoyed life immensely.

Then he strolled around to the Monte Casino, and after a chat with several friends entered into a game in which, with his usual luck, he came out winner.

As he was leaving the Casino he met a man coming in.

"Ah! Valverde!"

"The Señor Escalon?"

"Yes, I am home again."

"Welcome back."

"I sent a note for you to dine with me."

"Sorry I missed it, for I have the utmost regard for your dinners."

"Come round and sup with me now."

"What is going on up in the Casino?"

"Nothing; it's dull as our early mass."

"Did you play?"

"Yes."

"Won, of course?"

"A thousand, only."

"Thanks, I'll go and sup with you."

So saying the two friends went around to the elegant home of Señor Escalon.

It was indeed a superb house, large, with spacious halls, rooms, verandas and courts, and all furnished with extravagant luxury.

They went into Señor Escalon's snug sitting-room, wine and a cold supper were ordered, and they sat down for a talk.

"When did you get back, Escalon?"

"This morning."

"Had a hard trip of it, I guess?"

"No, a pleasant one."

"You went to the Ravera Hacienda?"

"Oh, yes."

"And Urbana?"

"Was there."

"His vessel, too?"

"Oh, yes."

"He had not been on a cruise, then?"

"No more than from Vera Cruz to the hacienda."

"He was surprised to see you, of course?"

"And sorry, as well."

"And you left him there?"

"No, he sailed twenty-four hours before I left."

"Good! I feared you would have trouble with him."

"No, why should I?"

"Well, he had the vessel and you were alone there."

"Yes, but his plan was to win the Señorita Ravera."

"But the American?"

Señor Escalon laughed and then said:

"Well, Urbana is a sly dog, and I'll tell you that he has become Don Ramon's honored guest, while he has cast a cloud upon that American officer that is remarkable for his ingenuity."

"He will make a superb villain, Urbana will."

"What has he done?"

"Why, he pretended to know nothing of the American's being known to the Raveras, and told of how he cheated at cards, struck him, a duel followed and he had some of the crew of his vessel there to set upon himself and friends, and that thus he received that ugly wound in his face."

"Good! and they believed it?"

"The Don did, but the girl loves the American and doubts."

"But Urbana has been staying there with his brig, pretending that the American was a pirate, and intending to sink him upon his return."

"Good!"

"Well, no; for it would bring the United States down upon us, rough shod, for him to do so, and all he would accomplish would be to bring on a war and marry the girl, perhaps."

"But I'll tell you the situation," and Señor Escalon went on to tell the whole story to which Valverde listened with the deepest attention.

"Then, of course, you will get a slice of the Don's fortune if he marries the daughter, for he will do so."

"No, he will never marry the Señorita Ravera."

"You think she will not have him?"

"I know it."

"Is she so desperately in love with the American as that?"

"Yes, she loves him with her whole heart and soul, but that is not the question."

"What is?"

"Well, I fell in love with her myself."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"I thought you never intended to marry."

"I have changed my mind since seeing Señorita Ravera, and I shall marry her, for it will be a good investment to get the handsomest woman in Mexico and largest fortune at one stake."

"Well, you are the man to accomplish what you undertake."

The banker laughed, and then said:

"Yes, I fooled you on those thirty thousand pesos, didn't I?"

"I do not understand, señor."

Again the banker laughed, and said:

"Your mask hid your face; you had a handsome suit of clothes on, but you forgot to take off the ring you wear, and which you have told me was the only one in Mexico; but I forgave you, my dear Valverde, though in future there must be honor among thieves, or I might lose my friendship for you."

"Escalon, I believe you are akin to the devil."

"Thank you, my dear Valverde," was the cool response of the banker.

CHAPTER LV.

THE LOST GOLETA.

As Clover had said, and the reader has surmised, the man who so cleverly got the treasure *goleta* into his possession was none other than Lamonte the Rover of the Lagoons.

He would have paid for the *goleta* if he could not have gotten her out any other way; but he was clever enough as a villain to plot to get possession of her without bloodshed or the cost of a dollar.

He had, as Clover had said, captured a small coasting craft, and in it, with half a dozen of his

crew, run up to New Orleans, leaving his own vessel hiding in a secluded bayou on the Gulf Coast.

Arriving at the city, he had pretended to be a gentleman passenger taken from a vessel at the Passes, and so went to the Hotel St. Luis and secured the best suite of rooms they had, registering as a planter of the coast.

Then he had gone out and taken a look at the *goleta* at anchor in river, and discovered that there were but two men on board.

Discovering that she was in condition to put to sea he had secured a blank bank book, dressed himself in elegant style and sought out Mr. Newman, the shipping agent.

What followed the reader has seen, and having gotten possession of his old vessel the men on board were taken down the river and, with the people taken from the coaster were cruelly turned adrift in an open boat to make their way ashore as best they could.

Then the *goleta* headed for the bayou where the Sea Arrow was lying in hiding.

The *goleta* was by no means in good trim, and so the two vessels kept together for a couple of days, and one night a storm came on and in the morning the treasure craft was nowhere to be seen.

The Sea Arrow went on to the retreat alone, and it was just sunset when she dropped anchor in the lake under the cliff.

Captain Lamonte at once went on shore, and after a pleasant greeting from the mother and daughter, told of how he had gotten the vessel.

"Then you had to pay for her after all, Lamonte?" Felice said.

"Yes, I gave five thousand in cash for her."

"Well, we will pay back to the people out of the treasure what they advanced, for we can afford to do that."

"I do not see why we should."

"In simple justice, that is all; but where is the *goleta*?"

"She is coming; we got separated last night in the storm."

"And you have not seen her since the storm?"

"No."

"And you say she was in such bad condition that you kept near her on the run out?"

"Yes."

"Who is in charge of her?"

"My second officer, Señor Ravel, and he has eight men with him."

"I never liked Ravel."

"He is a good officer."

"Yes, but a bad man."

"He'll bring her here in safety, never fear."

"But the treasure you removed to your vessel?"

"No, I simply saw that the treasure was there, that the secret closet had not been found, so I bought the *goleta*, feeling perfectly satisfied, and glad to get her, for she can be put in splendid trim for future use."

"Yet you did wrong not to remove the treasure, Lamonte."

"May I ask what future use you would have for the *goleta*, Señor Lamonte, if you keep your pledge to my husband and give up piracy, taking us out of this terrible life?" asked the Señora Chevallo quietly and firmly.

The face of the young pirate flushed at the question, and he responded:

"It is well to provide for the future, señora, be our plans what they may."

"I only hope that the *goleta* will come in safe, though I fear for her," said Felice.

"I have no fear for her in Ravel's hands."

"That is just what I have fear of, Señor Captain, because she is in his hands."

"Why, he is noted as a skillful sailor."

"Yes, and as a man who is false to every being on earth except Ravel."

"Ah! you fear he may run off with her?"

"I do."

"I had not thought of that, but I do not believe he will do so."

"How many men has he with him?"

"Eight."

"The *goleta* can be repaired and made as good as new?"

"Yes."

"She has her guns and ammunition on board?"

"She has."

"Well, you know how ambitious Ravel is to rise in command, and I fear he may seize upon the *goleta* and turn her into a pirate on his own account."

"Does he know of the treasure on board?" asked Señor Chevallo.

"I believe that he does, though not where to find it."

"That is an easy matter, and I believe you have simply paid out five thousand dollars, lost your time and will never see the *goleta* again," Felice said warmly.

"Perhaps I had better go at once in search of the *goleta*, then," Captain Lamonte said.

"I think it would be wise, my daughter, do not you?"

"Yes, mother, and the sooner the better."

"When did you see her last?"

"At midnight."

"Well, I hope you will find her, for if the treasure is lost, then you will still have an ex-

cuse for keeping up this lawless life, Lamonte, and I tell you that it must end soon," and Felice seemed to be in deep earnest.

The pirate at once returned on board his vessel, the anchor was gotten up and the vessel began to make her way toward the sea once more.

As she came out from the lagoons the lookout suddenly called out:

"Sail ho!"

A close look through the glass and Lamonte said:

"It is our old foe, that American schooner, so we must not stand out to sea until she has passed on, for they have not sighted us, and will not."

But he was mistaken.

CHAPTER LVI.

LIKE AN APPARITION IN HER WAKE.

THE ruse of the schooner-of-war, which Clover had suggested, had worked to a charm.

With every particle of sail lowered, and lying low in the waters, the schooner was not readily seen.

As she had disappeared from sight to seaward, with all sail set, those on the pirate craft supposed she would hold on her course, and had not sighted them inshore.

But instead the vessel was stripped of her canvas and lay almost in their course.

Every man was at his post, every officer on duty, and all was excitement on board the schooner, though it was suppressed completely.

The *goleta* had been stolen from them and here was the chance to catch the thief and also retake Don Ramon's yacht.

The Sea Arrow, meanwhile, believing that the schooner had not discovered her, put seaward soon after nightfall.

The purpose of Lamonte was to stand off-shore a number of leagues, then head up the coast in search of the lost treasure craft.

By a strange coincidence his course was almost that taken by the schooner-of-war Sea Soldier; but the man at the wheel let her fall off half a point from sheer laziness and so she passed half a mile to leeward of the craft lying in wait for her.

The officer of the deck would sweep the horizon lazily, more by habit than from an expectation of finding any sail in sight, and he failed to take in the tall, slender masts of the Sea Soldier and the dark hull lying so low upon the sea, like a tiger preparing for a fatal leap upon its prey.

The *goleta* swept by with a ten-knot breeze, bending gracefully as she sped along, and making splendid headway through the sea, which was not rough.

She passed the schooner, and held on, and every man on board the Sea Soldier drew a long breath.

As she swept by the order was given in a low tone:

"Set sail, and make no unnecessary sound, men!"

The men crept to their work like cats, and the well-oiled blocks of the schooner uttered no creaking sound, not a loud word was spoken and the Sea Soldier was in the wake of the Sea Arrow before the latter had gotten a mile away.

With all sail set she rushed on, now directly in the wake of her prey, every man at his gun, and all ready for action the moment they were discovered.

And as they watched, all saw that the Sea Soldier was gaining rapidly, for the *goleta* was not under full sail.

Captain Lamonte came on deck at eight bells, and glanced about him.

The night was dark, for clouds obscured the stars, and the wind seemed to be rising.

"Be prepared for a blow by dawn, senor," he said to the officer in charge.

"So I have thought, senor," was the response.

"Have you seen any sail?"

"None, senor—my God! see there!"

The officer had suddenly glanced astern and beheld not half a mile away, a leaning tower of white directly in their wake.

Like an apparition it had seemed to him from the sea, and any sailor's eye knew that it was a vessel under full sail.

"It is a phantom ship!" cried the officer in a tone of horror.

With a bitter oath Lamonte leveled his glass at the vessel and loud rung his voice:

"Fool! it is the American schooner-of-war!"

"Take that!"

As he spoke he drew his sword and brought it down upon the pirate officer with a force that laid him dead upon the deck.

"Blind idiots! do you not see that American war craft?"

"To your posts, you lazy, sightless hounds, and remember your necks are in a noose, for it will be no child's play to beat off that fellow, as you know."

"To quarters all!"

"Crowd her with sail!"

Loud rung his orders, and his having cut the officer in charge down for not having sighted the vessel sent the men in terror to their posts.

Up from below they came like a swarm of bees, and then came the words:

"I'll have every one of you who was on watch shot, soon as we beat that American off."

"There is no gold to be gained there, but iron, lead and steel, and death at the rope's end if he conquers us."

"Ho, aloft!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" answered the frightened lookout in trembling accents, for though asleep on his post for an hour past, he was now as wide awake as he ever had been in his life.

"Come to the deck here, you hound!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

But the man did not.

"Come down, I say!" roared Lamonte.

"Ay, ay, sir."

Still the frightened wretch did not move, and then came the order:

"Two of you devils take a rope and go aloft, tie it about that hound's neck, and make fast the other end—then hurl him off his perch!"

Two men sprung forward to obey, for the crew were now terribly alarmed, not only in terror of their aroused commander, but at the nearness of the foe they had so much reason to dread, for many of them recalled the attack of the schooner's crew upon the *goleta*.

But, as the men sprung into the rigging, a loud cry arose from the crew, and the man at the mast-head with a cry of terror leaped far out and descended into the sea, while the pirate *goleta* swept on.

"Curses upon him, he has cheated me!" cried Lamonte. He quickly calmed down and turned to see that his vessel and crew were all ready for action, to beat off the craft coming silent and white in their wake like an apparition risen from the sea.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE SEA SOLDIER IN ACTION.

THERE was no better sailor on the seas than was Cecil Dare.

His ship was always a model of neatness and order, his crew were under perfect discipline, and he was beloved by officers and men.

In action he was always a hero to his men, while his nerve was of iron and he never allowed himself to become excited.

When the schooner put away in chase of the *goleta*, hardly an order had to be given, for the men knew their duty.

They did not weigh chances, wonder how many more guns the pirate had than the schooner, and how much larger crew.

They simply went to their posts to fight it out under their gallant captain.

When they saw him come on deck with his boarding-helmet on and heavy cutlass swung at his side, they knew that he intended to carry the pirate by boarding.

By his side stood Clover and he also was armed and seemed anxious for the fray.

"Mr. Orville, we will carry the pirate by boarding," said Captain Dare, after a close look through his glass.

"Yes, sir, all is ready."

"The craft belongs, as you know, to Don Ramon, and I do not care to damage her any more than is necessary, and her value I will put up as prize-money for the crew."

"Yes, sir."

"We may, if he opens a heavy fire, return it with grape and small-arms, but I do not wish the heavy shot to be turned upon her."

"It would be better not to, sir, as you say, and the grape will do her crew more damage."

"And I shall lead the boarders, Mr. Orville."

"I had hoped for that honor, Captain Dare."

"No, you look to the care of the schooner. Ah! they have discovered us."

Just then the loud voice of Lamonte was heard, and all on the schooner knew that the pirates had at last discovered them.

Those on the Sea Soldier awaited the result with renewed interest.

The glasses of the officers showed that there was intense excitement on board the *goleta*, men were running to and fro, loud orders were heard and a panic seemed to have seized momentarily upon them.

Then the *goleta* began to set extra sail and the result was a greater speed through the waters.

At length she began to hold her own with the schooner it seemed, as she had everything set that would draw.

"I think we gain a little, sir; perhaps a quarter of a mile an hour," said Clover, who had been conning both vessels closely.

"Then we can catch him in time," said Lieutenant Orville.

"If he does not cripple us with his heavy guns," coolly responded Cecil Dare.

Suddenly Clover gave a startled cry and called out:

"Two men started up into the rigging, sir, and a man aloft has leaped into the sea."

"Ha! then it is to escape from the pirate. Did he jump clear of everything?"

"Yes, sir; I saw him hit the water," answered Clover.

"Forward there! keep a bright lookout for a man overboard from the *goleta*, and your ears open for a hail."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Clover, you can see in the dark, so go forward and look out for the fellow, and a dozen

of you men get life-lines to throw to him as we go by."

The orders were quickly obeyed, and all stood breathlessly waiting.

The schooner held on as before, directly in the wake of the *goleta*, and suddenly came from forward:

"I heard him hail!"

It was Clover's voice, and loud and shrill it rung out:

"Whereaway!"

"To starboard, sir!"

"Ay, ay, all life-lines to starboard!" shouted Clover, and then came the hail:

"You are heading all right."

"Now look out for me!"

It was too dark to see the man upon the waters, so a blue light was at once lowered, and there was visible the bold swimmer.

As the man was discerned through the blue light, there came a burst of flame from the stern of the *goleta*, and a deep roar, with the shrieking of the heavy solid shot as it flew above the decks of the schooner.

But not even a rope was touched, and the next instant the life-lines, with buoys attached, were thrown and the swimmer grasped one.

He swept rapidly astern as the schooner drove by, and the next instant the rope became taut with a jerk, but it held, and a cheer broke from the crew as the man was drawn in safety on board.

There came another shot from the *goleta*, and well aimed, it tore along the decks, and the man who had just been rescued from death in the sea fell dead.

The solid shot had killed him, and not another one of those on board the schooner was hurt.

"What an irony of fate," muttered Cecil Dare, as he beheld the strange sight, and he then called out to open with the forward pivot, loaded with grape.

Presently the order was obeyed, and the schooner showed that she was not an apparition, but a deadly foe in the pirates' wake.

Then both vessels opened rapidly, the pirate with his stern gun, the schooner with the bow pivot, and it became a grand and deadly sea duel between the two beautiful vessels as, under clouds of canvas, they rushed swiftly through the waters, illumining the sea far and wide with the red glare of action.

CHAPTER LVIII.

IN THE TEETH OF A TEMPEST.

THE sight was a grand one, though appalling, and the two vessels were flying along and fighting.

The pivot gun of the *goleta* was fired with heavy charges, and the bow gun of the schooner fired at the flash of her foe's shot, so as to cut down the crew with a shower of grape at every discharge.

The pirates, under this style of fire, were excited, for men dropped about their guns at every shot from the Sea Soldier.

But for the danger to the gunners from the grape, the schooner would have suffered far more from the heavy shot of the buccaneer.

The loss of a dozen men at last infuriated Lamonte to such an extent that he ordered his pivot loaded with grape.

But here the schooner's high bows, the cables hastily laid over forward, and bundles of old sails, protected the crew of the gun, while those on the stern of the *goleta* had only the taffrail to shield them, and the loss was just as heavy.

The vessels were very nearly equal in tonnage, the schooner perhaps being a trifle longer, while the *goleta* had more beam.

Their batteries were equalized, though the *goleta* had the most guns, by those on the Sea Soldier being of heavier caliber.

In the point of crew the *goleta*, even with her thinned ranks, had a dozen more men.

Still had the odds against him been far greater Cecil Dare would have gone into the fight.

In the discharge of duty he did not count odds.

There was a great desire in his heart to punish the kidnapper of Rachel Ravera, as well as to recapture the Don's yacht which had been desecrated by a pirate commander.

He would also have the name of driving from the seas a most cruel pirate, as Lamonte was spreading terror to honest craft by his cruelties.

Stern and determined, Cecil Dare stood upon his deck watching the chase.

His vessel had been hurt, but not materially, and half a dozen dead men were lying upon the decks, while twice that number had been carried below wounded more or less seriously.

His vessel gained upon the *goleta*, but so slowly as to be hardly perceptible, and he knew that they would not come to close quarters before dawn.

He saw that the skies looked black and threatening and the fear came to him that if a severe storm swept over the seas it might keep them apart.

So far the chase had been dead to seaward, the schooner holding vantage in this respect, and keeping the pirate from running for safety to his favorite hiding-places in the lagoons.

Still Cecil Dare knew that he was too close upon his foe for him to dodge him even in the lagoons had he been near them.

The fire of the schooner did more and more damage to life, though none to speak of to the vessel itself, and Lamonte became almost desperate.

At last he decided that he must turn and fight the schooner, for the men would no longer go to the stern gun and be shot down.

He gave orders to go about and at the same time to pour a broadside upon the schooner as the *goleta* wore around, and to have the large bow pivot loaded to the muzzle with grape to open as he bore down upon his enemy.

The crew were also ordered to use small-arms, and then the *goleta* was to be laid alongside the schooner and the combat must be fought out at close quarters on the Sea Soldier's deck.

The very moment that the *goleta* swung up into the wind, Cecil Dare detected what the pirate was up to, and instantly the order was given for the schooner also to come up sharply.

As the broadside of the *goleta* opened with heavy shot, the broadside of the schooner poured in grape, and Lamonte found that he had a very dangerous antagonist to fight.

But just at that moment came the command of Cecil Dare:

"In with all light sails! lively, lads, lively, for the storm is upon us!"

The pirate also began to take in his canvas and the guns were silent in the work of looking to the safety of the two vessels.

When both were stripped to meet the tempest, before another gun could be fired, the howling winds and roaring waters struck the *goleta*, completely hiding her from view.

"Every eye upon the *goleta*!"

"We must not lose her!" cried Cecil Dare, and up into the rigging went Clover and perched there in defiance of the storm, to make it his special duty to keep an eye upon the pirate.

A few seconds more and the tempest was upon the schooner.

But she met the shock bravely and then went dashing away upon its wings.

"Ho, Clover! do you see the pirate?" cried Captain Dare through his trumpet when the schooner was driving along before the gale.

"No, sir, not yet," came the reply.

But soon after came the hail:

"Ho, the deck!"

"Ay, ay, aloft!"

"I see the pirate, sir."

"Whereaway?"

"She is scudding, sir, under bare poles."

"Ay, ay, and we'll do the same or we'll drive her."

The little canvas that set upon the schooner was taken in, and then came the hail:

"Ho, the deck!"

"Ay, ay."

"The pirate has set a little sail and is sneaking off to port."

"Ay, ay, sir, we will do the same, for he shall not escape us," was Cecil Dare's stern response.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE RED FLAG ROVER.

ON like mad racers the two splendid vessels drove before the tempest, each with just sail enough set to steady them, and the *goleta* edging away so as to let the schooner drive by her, for Lamonte hoped he was not seen.

At length, as the schooner did not rush by, but kept in his wake steadily, he knew that he was seen, and he determined to try his guns again in spite of the gale.

So he gave the order to clear the stern pivot for action, and sent a crew to it.

"If we can cripple him, men, he is our game," he called out.

The men did not care for such game, still if the schooner could be crippled it would save them from a terrific battle, if not a defeat which might end in a yard-arm scene in which they were the important actors.

So they went to the gun with a will, and soon, echoing the thunder and rivaling the lightning, the deep boom of the gun, and the red glare of the flash were heard and seen.

The shot flew wild, for in that sea, with the vessel swaying terribly, no aim could be taken. But promptly came the reply of the bow-pivot on the schooner, and loaded with grape, which required no special aim, several struck the decks and a man was wounded.

In the heavy seas and fierce wind it was now seen that the schooner was the stanchest boat, and she gained steadily.

Lamonte was in despair at not being able to throw his enemy off, and yet kept up his fire hoping by a chance shot to cripple her.

As his gunners failed to send a shot home, he sprung to the gun himself, aimed and fired it.

The iron ball tore along the decks, and cut down several men, yet did no damage to the schooner, which still held on.

Encouraged, however, by the cheer which his crew gave him, he fired again and again, but with no result, and he then knew that his shot had been a chance one and he called a gunner to take his place.

The gunner was greeted with a cheer as the foretopmast of the schooner was seen to come down.

But the Sea Soldier still held on.

And so the fight was kept up, with an occasional shot from each vessel, until the dawn came in the east.

The storm blew out suddenly, and the waves began to go down so that the chance of a fight at close quarters became possible within a few hours.

The schooner had crept up to within an eighth of a mile of the *goleta*, and was still gaining a little, though not as before when the seas were rougher, and the wind blowing so furiously.

The *goleta* opened fire with the rising of the sun, but the terrible bow pivot of the Sea Soldier, loaded with grape, drove the men to shelter, and all the threats and profanity of Lamonte could not bring the men to take the risks again, for as surely as their gun belched forth a solid shot, that instant a shower of grape came upon them.

The pirate captain at length decided to try boarding, for the sea had run down and the wind was very light.

So about he came, and as though on the same pivot the schooner bore around and their broadsides flashed together.

Both vessels got hard blows, but the pirate was determined to board now with his desperate crew, and Cecil Dare was equally as determined to carry the *goleta* by boarding, for he had said:

"The fight must be upon his decks, men."

In vain did Lamonte maneuver for advantage, for he was met at every point, and the schooner in quick work handled better and, just as the *goleta* was to be laid alongside of the schooner the latter fell off, let her glide by and catching a puff of wind ran aboard and grappled.

"Boarders follow me!" cried Cecil Dare, and he sprung upon the pirate deck, with Clover by his side in an instant.

At their back came the boarders, and the fight was upon the pirates' deck.

The onslaught was terrible and irresistible. The *goleta*'s crew were fairly borne off their feet, while the pivot-gun on the high bows of the schooner was depressed by Lieutenant Orville and poured into the crowded mass of humanity upon the after deck of the Sea Arrow a perfect hail of grape and canister, with a volley of musketry and pistol-shots from the men still upon the Sea Soldier.

Terrible was the carnage, and the pirates saw that they were beaten as well as did the schooner's men know that the victory was won.

But, Lamonte was not a man to readily surrender. He rallied his men desperately about him and kept up the combat, until Captain Dare met him face to face and their swords crossed.

To the amazement of all, the pirate chief at once lowered his weapon, and what he said reached the ears of Dare, and Clover only.

"Strike, Cecil Dare and leave the brand of Cain upon you," cried the Red Rover.

Cecil Dare's face, flushed with the excitement of battle, became as white as though he was a dead man.

He did not strike, he did not lower his sword, for it fell from his hands to the deck!

Into the face of the pirate he gazed with a look hard to fathom, and then said sternly, as he quickly recovered his composure:

"Put this man in double irons and take him to my cabin. Clover, you take charge of him."

"Clover? My God, boy, I deemed you dead," and the Rover started back at the approach of the lad as though a ghost from the grave had confronted him.

"No, I am very much alive, Captain Lamonte. I'll take the liberty of hauling down your colors as you have no further use for them," and Clover quickly lowered the Red Flag of the Rover.

CHAPTER LX.

THE PIRATE'S STORY.

THE dropping of his sword by Captain Dare had been attributed to an accident by officers and men, and his manner and look had not been noticed when he heard the words of the pirate.

Clover had quickly lowered the flag, and as men stepped forward and ironed the chief, the lad said quickly:

"Now, come with me, Captain Lamonte, for I assure you that I am no ghost."

The pirate sullenly followed, and was led into the cabin of the schooner.

Captain Dare remained on deck, to repair damages to both vessels, look after the wounded, bury the dead and iron the prisoners.

So that Clover was alone with the chief in the cabin.

He gave him a seat, and then took a chain and made him fast to a ringbolt in the floor, while he remarked:

"You escaped before, Captain Lamonte, when you were Captain Dare's prisoner, but this time you are quite safe."

"Curse you, boy, I had hoped I had killed you."

"Oh, no, I'm all right, yet you did come pretty near it."

"I fell into the water, you know, and it revived me, so fearing you, I dared not show myself, and made my escape."

"Some one aided you."

"Who said so?"

"I know it, for you could not escape otherwise."

"You forget that there were plenty of boats in the stronghold, and I could follow the coast to the nearest port, living upon fish and what else I could get hold of to eat."

"Well, I do not wonder that you escaped, for you are no ordinary boy."

"But, what are you doing on board this vessel?"

"Private secretary to the captain."

"Do you know who he is?"

"Captain Cecil Dare."

"Yes, but do you know his father?"

"I hadn't that honor."

"Well, his father was my father."

"Nonsense."

"It is so."

"I can't believe that one so good and one so bad can be brothers, any more than I believe that oil and water will mix."

"Yet I tell you the truth."

"I do not believe you; in fact, I know that it is not so."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind, but I know more of you, Lamonte, than you dream of."

"Boy, who are you?"

Clover laughed, and the pirate said:

"It strikes me that I have met you before, and the same idea haunted me when you were at the stronghold."

Again Clover laughed, and Lamonte asked:

"Have we not met before?"

"Never mind me, Captain Lamonte, but prove to me that you are a brother of Captain Dare."

"I am his half-brother."

"Yes, soon it will be only his cousin."

"No, I tell you the truth."

"If you really will tell the truth, I will tell you where you have met me before."

"Well, my father married twice—three times, in fact. Captain Cecil was his son by his first wife, who died, it is said, of a broken heart, and I am not the one to deny it, for I knew my father intimately."

"In less than a year after his first wife's death, Cecil's mother, he married my mother, who was very rich."

"When I was born my mother took a great dislike to Cecil, then three years old, and, as I grew older, I had the same feeling toward him. The result of it was that we made his existence a wretched one, and my mother, having complete influence over my father, turned him also against Cecil."

"So years passed. I reached my fourteenth year, and my parents spoke of sending me into the navy, while Cecil was to be brought up as a farm-hand; but the day after this decision, Cecil, then sixteen, disappeared, and what became of him we never knew."

"My mother died a year after, and my father made me promise never to speak of his first marriage and that he had another son."

"After several years he married again, and married one who was supposed to be a poor widow with three children—two girls and a son; but he knew that the widow was the heir to a large fortune in England, which she would get only at the death of an aged relative, and he felt that he could bide his time."

"I need tell you no more than that I liked wickedness rather than virtue, and went to the bad so rapidly that I became, as you see me, a sea rover, with every chance of being hung up to a yard-arm unless you wish to make a small fortune by helping me to escape."

"We'll talk of that later," said Clover, in a whisper, and the face of the pirate brightened with hope.

Then Clover asked:

"But how was it you knew Captain Dare so quickly, when you had not seen him since he was seventeen years old?"

"He had captured my *goleta* as you doubtless know, and I held him in my power for an instant then, when he sprung boldly in among my men and confronted me."

"He was in close quarters, and I had my sword point over his heart and as it pierced the flesh I knew him."

"I dropped the blade, as he did awhile ago on recognizing me, when if I had had the nerve then, I would not now be his prisoner."

"Then, I heard from a man with me, who had once been in the navy, that the captain of the schooner was Cecil Dare, and that he had entered the service as a cabin-boy and won his way to the quarter-deck."

"His mother's name was Dare, I recalled, and I knew then that he was my half-brother—see?"

"Yes, I see," answered Clover, and he seemed lost in deep thought.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE BROTHERS.

NOT until late in the afternoon, when the sun was upon the horizon and he had been called by the steward to his supper, did Cecil Dare go to his cabin.

The repairs to the vessels, the care of the wounded and securing of the prisoners had been his especial care, and with a slight lunch on deck he had seemed content.

At last the two vessels were ready to move, the dead had been consigned to their sea graves, and easy sail was ordered set and the course laid for Hacienda Harbor.

Lieutenant Orville had been placed in command of the prize, and his orders were to keep near the schooner, but, if he lost her in the night or a storm, to hold on for Hacienda Harbor.

The prisoners had all been put in irons below decks in the *goleta*, and the wounded, both the Americans and pirates, were also transferred to the *Sea Arrow*, with people to care for them and the surgeon of Cecil Dare's vessel.

"I wish to be in fighting trim, and unhampered, if I meet a foe who would rob me of my prize," he had said to Lieutenant Orville.

"You have but sixty men for duty, sir, yet I have such confidence in you I would not feel anxiety for the result against a foe even stronger," was the complimentary remark of the lieutenant.

Then, when the two vessels moved off from the scene of combat, and headed for the Hacienda Harbor, Cecil Dare walked toward his cabin.

He hesitated upon the companionway and called to Clover:

"I will see him alone, Clover, and have something to say to you afterward," he said.

The lad bowed and made no reply, and Cecil Dare descended to the cabin.

There sat the pirate chief, heavily ironed about the ankles, and chained to the floor, but with his arms free.

Clover had humanely placed an easy-chair for him, and he was taking it easily, a cigar between his lips when Captain Dare entered.

"No, I was not mistaken I see, for you are Cecil Lamond," said Lamonte quietly, regarding his victor curiously.

"I was Cecil Lamond, in the long ago, but I dropped the name for that of my mother."

"I am Cecil Dare now, Montague."

"Well, whatever name you go by you have won fame for it," was the response.

"And the name you held in boyhood you disgraced, and the one you hold now you have made terrible as that of a pirate, Montague."

"Yes, our lives have been far different, and yet our paths strangely cross now."

"True, and bitter to me is the thought that they do."

"We are half-brothers, Montague, and yet when boys together there was not even friendship existing between us."

"You had the hard, cruel nature of our father, and he made my mother's life wretched and she found rest in an early grave."

"I fell to the tender mercies of a father I could not love, a stepmother I feared, and a step-brother whom I soon learned to despise."

"I stood it as long as I could, until I felt that my spirit was breaking, and then I ran away."

"Of my life why speak, more than to say that, unaided, save by a will to conquer, I am to-day a commander in the navy of our country, and the captor of my pirate brother!"

"My God, Montague! I wish I had never entered the service, as it has led me to this."

"It will not be pleasant for you, Cecil, to put the hangman's noose about your brother's neck, but your duty will force you to do it."

"Yes, my duty will," was the sad response.

Then Lamonte, as I will still call Montague Lamond, said:

"I knew you on the *goleta* when you seized her, and you have a scar over your heart now, made by my sword-point."

"I recognized you in time to check the thrust that would have pierced your heart, and then came your shot, which slightly stunned me, and I fell, pretending to be fatally wounded."

"We have been matched against each other twice, Cecil, and you have been the victor each time."

"I recall, too, in our boyhood, that you were ever kind toward me, in spite of my treatment of you."

"You never struck me a blow, but bore all, and now, knowing your nature, I feel how hard it will be for you to hang me, *your brother*, and I really sympathize with you with all my heart."

Cecil Dare hardly noticed the words, and said:

"How came you to be a pirate, Montague, with life open to you for an honorable career?"

"The devil in my nature, Cecil."

"A man who has won the name you have as a bold sea rover, and can manage the desperate crew that you have, had it in him to win honor and fame."

"Thanks for your complimentary words, Cecil; but I chose the bad, with my chance to go right, while you with every incentive to drive you to ruin, chose the good in life and thus we stand to-day, you a naval officer, the captor of Lamonte the Rover, *your brother*."

"It is a fearful thought to me that it is so, Montague."

"It is and so must be; but where do you head for now?"

"To the hacienda of Don Ravera to restore to him the yacht you captured so cleverly."

"And then?"

"I shall sail for New Orleans to deliver up my

prisoners and report my capture of Lamonte the Red Flag Rover."

"If I could have met the Senorita Ravera in the long ago, Cecil, I would have led a different life."

"Ah, no, Montague, an angel from Heaven would never have changed your life."

"But I cannot bear to see you ironed, and until we arrive in port I will set you free," and the order was given to free the pirate chief of his irons.

CHAPTER LXII.

CLOVER'S PROPOSITION.

THAT night Cecil Dare held the deck until the middle watch and then, worn out, he sought his cabin.

Lamonte had retired to the state-room assigned to him, and Clover was also fast asleep.

A troubled look rested upon the face of the young captain as the light of the cabin lamp fell upon it; but after a glass of wine to revive his strength, he retired to his quarters to seek slumber.

But sleep would not come to him, and he was on deck at dawn again.

The schooner was bounding merrily along, with the *goleta* half a mile astern, and the day promised to be clear with a fresh breeze from a favorable quarter for their run.

Soon Clover came on deck, and approached his captain.

"Well, lad, it was a great victory we gained yesterday, though we lost many a brave fellow," said Cecil Dare, pleasantly.

"Yes, sir, and no other man would have gained the fight, for the odds were against us far more than we thought."

"Yes, for the prisoners Lamonte had on board were set free on condition they would fight for him, and the foolish fellows did so, without seeming to know that they were fighting against themselves if we were beaten off."

"Captain Dare?"

"Yes, Clover."

"Yesterday Lamonte told me who he was, for I heard his remark to you when he lowered his sword."

"Hal was it heard by any one else?" quickly asked the officer.

"Not one, sir, and the men have no suspicion of the truth."

"I am glad of that, for I—"

"I understand, sir, that you cannot be the one to send your brother to the yard-arm."

"Yes, that is just it, although he has been my enemy since he was old enough to talk."

"Let me tell you how it is, Clover, that we are brothers," and Captain Dare briefly told the story, adding:

"Now, bad as he has been, guilty as he now is of a thousand crimes, he is my brother, and my whole nature revolts from the thought that I am to be his executioner."

"Captain Dare, will you do me a favor?"

"Certainly, Clover."

"Go through the ward-room to the cabin, not letting the prisoner see you enter it, and listen to what I have to say to Lamonte."

"This is a strange request, Clover."

"You said that you would do as I asked, sir; not now, but after breakfast, and you will be glad to know what I say to him, I feel assured."

"I will yield to you, Clover, though I cannot understand your motive."

"All will be made plain, sir, but do not make your presence known, I beg of you, no matter what you hear."

After breakfast Captain Dare found an opportunity to slip into his state-room unseen, and Clover let it be known that no one was to enter the cabin for a couple of hours as the captain was seeking rest.

Then the lad slipped down into the cabin where Lamonte sat, reading a book as complacently as though the shadow of the gallows was not hanging over him.

"Captain Lamonte, I would like to have a talk with you," said Clover, seating himself.

"Do you come with propositions from your captain?"

"No, sir, from myself, and you read aright that I have a proposition to make to you."

"Name it."

"You were in New Orleans some ten days ago."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how, but you bought there, with a fraudulent check, your *goleta*, and set sail with her for the lagoon stronghold."

"Is she there?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"I lost her in a storm and have not seen her since."

"Then she went on to the stronghold?"

"No, for I left there day before yesterday to come and look for her."

"Well, I happen to know that you got her back to take from her the treasure from the secret closet."

"Hal that traitress Felice told you that secret."

"She did nothing of the kind, for I found it out in my own inquisitive way."

"Well, what of it?"

"Did you take the treasure from the *goleta*?"

"I did not."

"Who is in command of the craft?"

"Ravel, whom you know."

"Then neither you, or any one else except Ravel, will ever see that treasure."

"You think he would run off with the *goleta*?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, what was your proposition?"

"To send me with your league ring, which all the Lagoon Pirates I know respect, to bring the *goleta* away from the stronghold, and for the treasure she held I would set you free."

"Boy, I'd do it at once if I could; but the *goleta* is not there, and I begin to feel as did Felice, and you do, that Ravel has run off with her, so to get that treasure you will have to run her down and capture Ravel as you did me."

"Well, have you any proposition to make to me for your escape?"

"Can you arrange it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have a belt of precious stones around my waist, and I will divide them with you if you set me free."

"Let me see them."

"Some one may come in."

"No, the captain is asleep in the ward-room, and I left orders for no one to enter the cabin, pretending he was here."

"Well, I will show you the gems," and he took off the belt, and revealed in different compartments, rubies, emeralds, diamonds and other precious stones, as also some Mexican and American bank-notes stowed away there.

"Here is a fortune, lad, fully forty thousand dollars, and I'll give you half of it if you will set me free."

"Divide it now, and give me my half, and I'll set you free."

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes, because I do not intend Captain Dare shall hang his brother," was the response.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE OTHER MOTIVE.

"Boy, I do not know that I can trust you," said Lamonte, looking greedily at his riches, and then thinking of the fate before him.

"Don't do it, then."

"I'll give you a fifth of my wealth, and pay you now."

"Divide even or hang."

"If you will tell me that you come from Captain Dare, who does not wish to be known in this matter, I will do it."

"I'll not tell you so."

"But you do."

"I do not."

"Will you swear it?"

"Yes, but the idea of a pirate asking for an oath," and the youth laughed.

"He knows nothing of your wish to set me free for money?"

"See here, Captain Lamonte, do you think Captain Dare would sell his brother's escape from the gallows?"

"No, it would not be like him."

"He is rich, for he has won a fortune with his sword, and if he were a poor man, he would never sell his brother's life, be the sum enormous."

"I believe you, and now see that he wishes you to help me to escape, and that you will make capital out of it for yourself."

"No, Captain Dare knows nothing of my plot to aid you to escape, nor would he do so himself, for duty is paramount with him to all things."

"I wish to have you escape, and will help you to do so, and I wish you to pay me half the riches you have in that belt, and that leaves you a snug sum besides."

"Now will you do it?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

The pirate obeyed, but it was very evident that he parted with his gems with the greatest reluctance.

When Clover had them in his hands, Lamonte asked:

"Now will you deceive me after all?"

"Had I intended to do that I would have driven a closer bargain."

"Well, you pledge yourself to help me escape?"

"I do; but now let me tell you another motive I have."

"Well, out with it."

"I don't wish to see my brother hanged."

"Your brother?"

"Yes."

"I your brother?"

"Well, we'll call it half-brother, for your father married my mother."

"By Heaven, but I know you now—you are Mark Cloverfield, the little son of the widow whom my father married."

"Yes, and you are Montague Lamond, my step-brother, of whom I am not in the least proud."

"Well, boy, this is a surprise indeed."

"I knew you all the time, Captain Lamonte, but saw you did not know the little lad you so

shamefully maltreated, you and your father, until I was forced to run away from home.

"I have written to my mother and sisters, but no response has come; I now wish to learn from you where they are, and how they are."

"I do not know; but I do know that my father got an inheritance which your mother never dreamed was to be hers. This fortune he sunk in speculation and then shot himself."

"That was proper, very proper indeed, just what I wish he had done before he crossed my mother's path to wreck her life; but he left her poor of course?"

"Certainly, for if he had had any money he would never have committed suicide."

"Now I had an idea that my mother and sisters were poor, and so I made you, who helped to squander what was theirs, hand over the riches I now hold."

"But I will keep my word with you and let you go, *brother* Montague, though, as you will be hanged in the end, better have it over with now."

"Boy, you are Satan's own cub!" hissed the incensed Rover.

"Thank you! But keep your eyes and ears open and be ready, for the first chance I get you shall go free, as I promised. The opportunity probably will come when we reach an anchorage."

Clover carefully stowed away his riches, and left the cabin, to be soon after joined by Cecil.

"My poor boy, what have I not heard? And you, too, were a sufferer through my father and half-brother? It was your poor mother whom my father married as his third wife."

"Well, we are brothers in misfortune, Clover, if not in kinship. The past will be buried, I hope, while we will look up those dear to you and see that they suffer no more."

"And did I do right to pledge myself to help him to escape, Captain Dare?"

"Yes, you did right. I cannot be the executer of my brother, be he ever so vile."

"I will say nothing, do nothing, know nothing, and leave it all to you, for I know that you can carry out what you undertake."

"If it is a mistake, he will some day meet his just doom at the yard-arm, but it will not be my hand that places the noose about his neck, not my voice that seals his doom in giving the fatal order," and Captain Dare, deeply impressed with what he had heard, and all that he now knew, turned away, while Clover muttered:

"Yes, we will find my dear mother. What a noble protector he will be to her! How proud she will be of her *new son*!"

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE BRIG MEETS HER MATCH.

THE night followed thick and with a high wind, and in spite of the close lookout kept upon both the schooner and the *goleta*, they became separated.

When the morning dawned the schooner was not visible from the deck of the *goleta*, and soon after land arose ahead.

"It is the hacienda; but the schooner cannot certainly have arrived ahead of us," said Lieutenant Orville to a midshipman who was acting as first officer.

"No, sir, she doubtless held back for us, while you know we crowded on canvas to cut through the big waves," answered the middy.

"Yes, and so dropped her far astern."

"Well, she will be along during the day, and now to run in to an anchorage and rejoice the heart of Don Ramon with the return of his yacht," and Lieutenant Orville held on into the pass, answering the shot from the fort by running up the United States flag.

But the Don knew that his yacht had been taken by Lamonte, and he threw a solid shot over the decks of the *goleta*.

She at once came to, and a boat put off, with the middy in it, and the situation was reported, when the *goleta* again stood in and dropped anchor.

The Don and Rachel came off in a boat, and the whole story was told by Lieutenant Orville, of the going to New Orleans, the chase and capture of the Sea Arrow.

The Don then knew that it was not Cecil Dare, but captain Almo Urbana who was the guilty one.

As they sat on the piazza looking seaward, later in the afternoon, a vessel appeared in sight, coming from seaward.

It was the schooner, and while rejoicing at her coming, another vessel shot into view heading up the coast.

"It is Urbana's brig," cried the Don.

The brig had already sighted the schooner, and her drums were heard calling the men to quarters, while she lay to, awaiting the approach of the Sea Soldier.

But the Sea Soldier at once lay to, also.

"What does that mean?" asked the Don.

"Captain Dare wishes to fight further off shore, sir, so as not to endanger the hacienda by the fire," replied Orville.

"Yes, but will he dare fight the brig?"

"Yes, sir, for the brig, though flying the Mexican flag, seems to have challenged him, and he will see what she means."

The brig now moved toward the schooner, and soon opened fire from her bow gun.

The schooner did not reply, but the brig luffed and fired a broadside.

Hardly had she done so when the schooner got under way, stripped to fighting-trim, and slowly her guns opened fire.

There was no hurry, all was deliberation, and every shot told.

At the peak was her flag, and, why a vessel flying the Mexican colors should fire on him, Captain Dare did not know, the two countries being at peace. He did not wait longer, however, than to see she was in deadly earnest in the attack.

The fire of the brig was wild, that of the schooner perfect, coming nearer and nearer and firing with a deliberation that was remarkable, and an aim that was terribly true.

The Mexican's topmasts were soon shot away, his bulwarks shattered, two guns dismounted, and the deck was strewn with the dead and dying.

And all this could be seen from the piazza of the hacienda, where Rachel, pale but calm, bided the end.

Then the schooner poured in a broadside and the bowsprit of the brig was shot away, and she broached to.

At the same moment, as the schooner began to bear down for closer quarters, a boat, bearing a white flag, put off from the brig and rowed toward the schooner.

Instantly the firing of the Sea Soldier ceased, and as the boat drew near, an officer hailed in English:

"Ahoy! Is that an American schooner?"

"Ay, ay, sir, the Sea Soldier, United States schooner-of-war."

"What brig is that?"

"The Relentless, Captain Urbana. There has been a sad mistake which I wish to explain."

"Ay, ay, sir! Come aboard."

The Mexican officer soon boarded, and approaching Cecil Dare said with marked regret:

"It is exceedingly unfortunate, sir, but we heard of the capture of your vessel by Lamonte, the Pirate, and supposed we were firing upon him, he raising your flag as a lure."

"Captain Urbana regrets the mistake exceedingly."

"Yes, he has cause to, far more than I have; but, under the circumstances, sir, I can only accept his apology with a demand that he lays at anchor as I pass and salutes my flag with twenty-one guns."

"He will refuse to do this, sir, it having been a mistake."

"Very well, sir. Say to Captain Urbana that five minutes after you return I shall open fire and fight it out, claiming his vessel as a prize for his blunder, and in my action my Government will support me."

The Mexican officer bowed and retired, and his return to his boat was eagerly watched.

Five minutes after, as the schooner got under way to renew the fight, the Stars and Stripes were run up over the brig, and as the Sea Soldier drew near, one by one her unshotted guns belched forth a salute.

The schooner's flag was dipped three times as she sailed by, heading for the Hacienda Harbor, while the brig having temporarily repaired damages, sailed away, while Clover remarked:

"That was no mistake, Captain Dare, but done on purpose."

"Very true, Clover."

"When he saw that you were going to whip him he crawled out of a bad scrape the best way he could," continued Clover.

"Such is my opinion, Clover; but yonder goes the brig, as though anxious to leave our company."

"Yes, sir, he doubtless is; but there lies the *goleta* in the Hacienda Harbor."

"I am glad of that; but you must not forget, Clover, that you have some special work to do while we are here."

"I'll not forget it, sir," was the reply of the youth, and he went down into the cabin, to put the prisoner in irons, he said.

CHAPTER LXV.

A PROMISE KEPT.

THE pirate captain sat in the cabin with an expression of hope upon his face.

He began to feel certain that neither Cecil Dare or Clover would let him be hanged.

The fight between the brig and the schooner he wondered at, until he heard the explanation, and then he saw as the schooner sailed by that the Mexican had been badly whipped, so had gotten out of a bad scrape the best way possible.

The lad found Lamonte really quite cheerful, and he said to him:

"We will drop anchor within a quarter of an hour."

"Yes."

"I will put these irons upon you, but give you

the key, and you be on the alert as soon as it is dark."

"I will."

"It is coming on to rain, so the night will be dark, and the watch not particularly wide awake."

"I understand."

"You are a good mariner, as I know."

"Yes."

"When you hear the hoot of an owl in-shore, then free yourself, take the lariat hanging yonder, and lower yourself from the stern ports."

"The hooting of the owl will be your guide, and when you land I will meet you."

"I will have one of the Don's small sail boats ready for you, with provisions and all, and the oars muffled so that you can row out past the guard in the fort."

"I understand you."

"Once out in open water you will know which way to go."

"To my stronghold, of course."

The boy laughed, and the man asked with a show of anger:

"What amuses you, boy?"

"You will have just escaped from hanging, will you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I advise you not to go there."

"Why?"

"This vessel will sail there, leaving at dawn."

"She can never find the stronghold."

"You forget that I know the way."

"You! yes, traitor, you will—"

"Now, don't get angry, for after all you fare very well in not being hanged, and I am giving you a hint to further keep your head out of a noose."

"Then I shall not go there."

"You are wise, Captain Lamonte; but now I must leave you, for you know just what to do."

"Yes."

Clover now put the irons on the prisoner, remarking as he did so:

"You better drop the irons overboard, so that they will think you jumped overboard with them all, preferring to die by drowning than by hanging."

"What do I care what is thought?"

"Well, not to get me into trouble, do so."

"All right."

"I don't believe you will."

"Yes, for I have no ill-will against you, boy."

Clover said no more and went on deck, to find the fort saluting the schooner, which responded promptly gun for gun.

Dropping anchor near the pirate prize, Cecil Dare met at the gangway the Don, Rachel and Lieutenant Orville, who gave him the warmest of welcomes.

Then Clover was presented and the party adjourned to the shore, where Clover amused himself by looking at the little fort.

He noted the position of the Don's boat, selecting a pretty little craft of five tons, sloop-rigged, and then he boarded the schooner again, and, under plea of taking the captain's luggage ashore, took with it a very generous supply of provisions for the prisoner.

It was dark when he reached the shore and the prisoners were placed in the boat, and the luggage taken into the hacienda according to the Don's orders.

Then the lad went back to the little boat, got the anchor up and muffling the oars rowed her over to the point of land opposite to the little fort.

It was raining now quite hard, and out of the darkness came the loud hoot of an owl.

It was repeated a dozen times, until suddenly out of the water arose a human form.

"True as steel, boy; let me grasp your hand."

"No, Lamonte, keep off, for I know you, and know that for what you gave me to-day you would kill me to-night."

"There is your boat, and in it is a lantern with provisions to last you a week, and dry clothing."

"Get into it and be off."

"But I have no weapon with which to defend myself."

"There are weapons also in the boat, with ammunition, too; but I did not load them—for reasons."

"Give me one of your pistols."

"Not I, and keep off, for I would shoot you like a dog if you attempted my life now."

"Go, I say."

The pirate uttered a curse, gazed earnestly about him, walked back into the water and got into the boat.

Then, without a word, he rowed away, and Clover had a tramp of a mile around the shore back to the hacienda.

"Well?" said Cecil Dare.

"He has gone."

But when the midnight watch was set an alarm was sounded on the schooner, for a search proved that Lamonte had escaped.

"Yes, escaped, but to go to his death, for he slipped out of the stern port with his heavy irons on," said the officer of the deck.

And so it was written down in the schooner's log.

CHAPTER LXVI.
CONCLUSION.

THE Sea Soldier lay at the Hacienda Harbor for several days, and then one day Clover reminded Cecil Dare that his pledge to Felice, the pirate's daughter, was at an end.

So the schooner sailed for the lagoon, and with Clover as pilot, entered the intricate network of waters, and one night dropped anchor in the lake, to begin action at dawn.

But when the dawn came not a human being was in sight, and the crew landing in force found that the stronghold had been hastily deserted.

The Pirate Queen and her people had fled, and Clover and Cecil Dare at once decided that Lamonte, in spite of what the lad had said to urge him against it, had gone there and given the alarm.

Certain it was that all were gone and much plunder remained, with the guns in the fort and half a dozen small craft.

All fell as a prize to the schooner, which headed for New Orleans with the little fleet in tow, the yacht being given back to her lawful owner the Don.

The booty taken on board the Sea Arrow was also valuable, so that if the *goleta*, with its treasure, had been lost, the crew by no means fared badly as regards their share of prize money.

Arriving at New Orleans Cecil Dare found orders calling him North; at which he departed, accompanied by Clover, who at once went in search of his mother and sisters.

The lad found them after a short search and the joy of the runaway's return was more than pen can express.

There, a month after, the lad welcomed Cecil Dare, and Mrs. Lamond at once adopted the handsome young officer as her son.

Some months later Cecil Dare had orders sending him again to the Gulf to engage in pirate-hunting, and he had the satisfaction of feeling that when he again returned to his native land he would bring the beautiful Rachel Ravera as his wife.

But the young captain did not go alone on his southern trip, for Clover accompanied him, not, however, as Clover, the Runaway, but as Midshipman Mark Cloverfield, for the report which Captain Dare had made of the lad's services had gained for him a midship's berth in the United States Navy.

When the Sea Soldier again went pirate-hunting, Cecil Dare decided that his first duty should be to run down the famous Mexican buccaneer, who, once an honored officer and known as Almo Urbana, had hoisted the black flag as a rover of the Gulf.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
98 William Street, New York.